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LD ACTIO JACKSON

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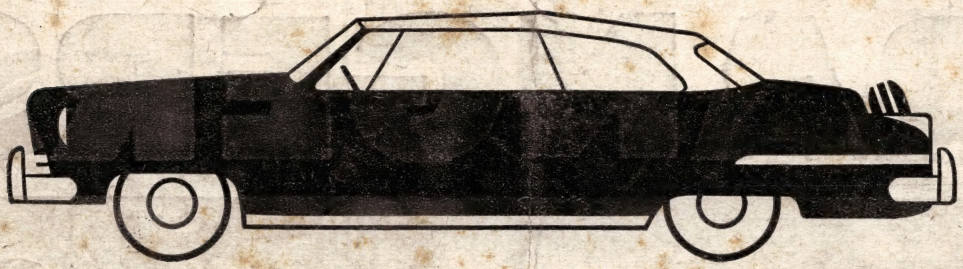

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AMATEURS ONLY! Our students not eligible. Make copy of car 8 ins. long. Pencil or pen only. Omit the lettering. All drawings must be received by Sept. 30, 1953. None returned. Winners notified.

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Please enter my attached drawing in your Draw a Car contest. **(PLEASE PRINT)**

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* From "They Went to College," Haverman & West

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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 52, No. 1 SEPTEMBER, 1953

A Complete Jim Hatfield Novel

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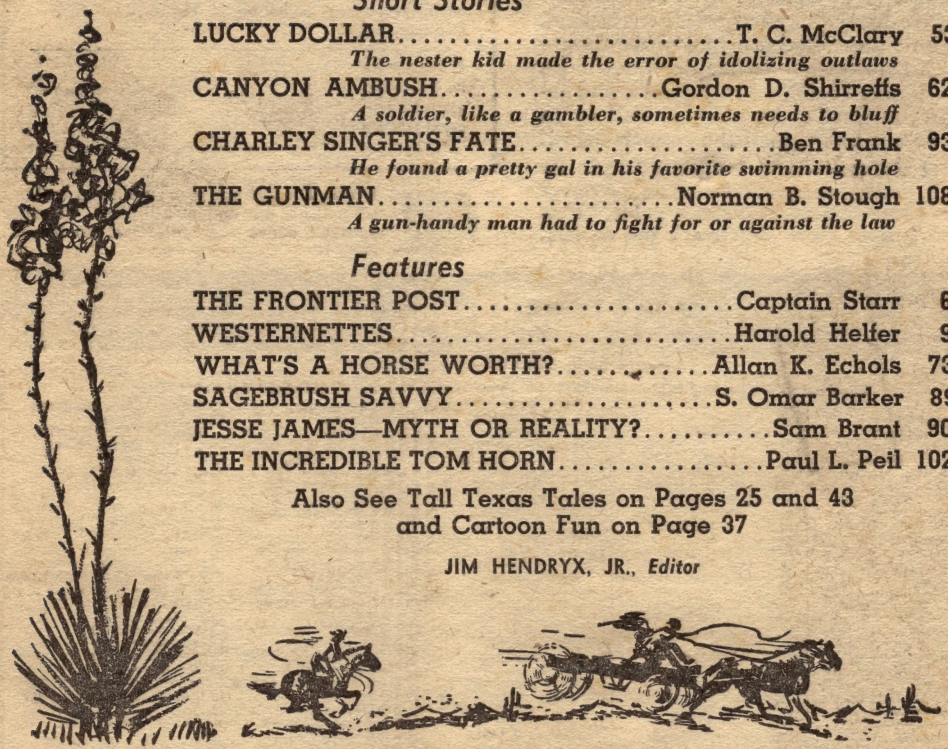
JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*



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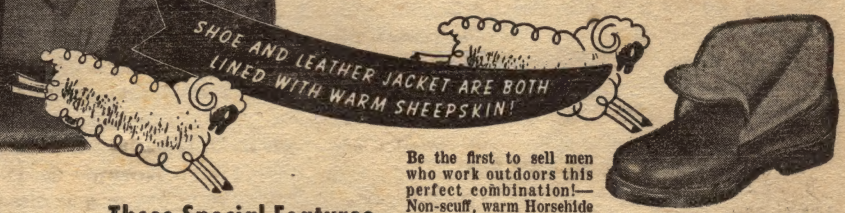

Be the first to sell men who work outdoors this perfect combination!— Non-scuff, warm Horsehide leather jacket lined with wooly Sheepskin—and new Horsehide work shoe also warmly lined with fleecy Sheepskin and made with oil-resisting soles and leather storm welt!

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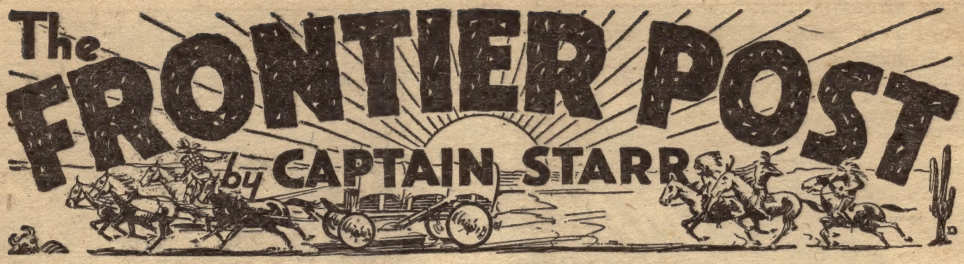


Fast Guns and Black Widows

SUPPOSE all the noted gunslingers of the old West could be brought together in a grand championship shooting match, with a few of today's crack shots. Who would prove to be the fastest and deadliest? Billy the Kid? Wild Bill Hickok? Badman John Wesley Hardin, Bandit Sam Bass, or one of that great galaxy of shooting stars among the Texas Rangers?

No, gals and galluses. Top honors would probably go to a smalltown California cop, Walt Mason. He is today's world champ with a sixgun, this Police Sergeant Mason of El Monte, the fastest and most accurate marksman alive with a hand gun.

Faster Than the Ear

Of course, nobody can say for sure who among the triggering celebrities of past and present was really the best. The number of notches on his gun butt was the proverbial indication of a gunhand's skill.

But Sergeant Mason couldn't compete in that way, because he never killed a man in all his 48 years. Just the same, any dead-eye dick of the old days would have very tough going in shooting it out against him.

One of Champion Mason's stunts is to walk towards a man-size target with both hands raised over his head. At a signal, at a distance of about 20 feet, he draws and fires. He puts three bullets in the "kill" area in just a fraction over a second! He fires those three shots so fast that onlookers at the target range frequently declare that he fired only twice!

Mason cross draws, as the majority of hot lead throwers always have, from an open clip-type holster on his left hip. His gun starts talking as it leaves the holster and the third shot is fired as it comes to eye level.

Naturally, it took months of faithful practice before Mason got into the championship class. But he must have had a natural aptitude. In his rookie days, his range instructor criticized him for firing too rapidly.

After he became famous as a gun wizard, Mason was called on to instruct hopeful students. But he gave that up. Too many overanxious ones either shot off their own toes or else sprayed lead dangerously over the surrounding scenery.

The sixgun Mason uses is virtually the same weapon as the old-fashioned trouble iron. He does his stuff with a Colt .38, which is just a mite lighter than the .45's and .44's of the good old black-powder days. It is a rather remarkable fact that with all the sweeping changes that have come about since the gunsmoke days of the old West, especially in other firearms, the Colt sixgun is basically the same as the early models.

The Widow's Web

Not far from Crackshot Mason's stamping grounds, in the small town of Yucaipa, is another interesting activity in the trigger trade. Here spiders have gone into defense production. Here Mrs. Nan Songer raises spiders which patriotically yield up their webs for use as cross hairs in bombsights, gunsights, range finders and other delicate optical instruments.

This is undoubtedly one of the strangest businesses in the world. Mrs. Songer gets 30 cents a foot and upwards for spider web and can strip off 200 feet from one spider. A very easy 60 bucks, you would think. But there's mighty little competition. Practically nobody envies Mrs. Songer her odd occupation. Why? Because the spiders she raises and strips of their webs are the dreaded black widows.

This shiny-black, sharp-legged varmint

with the red hourglass on its underside is more dreaded than the rattlesnake in the Southwest, where both flourish. Some authorities declare that the black widow is more venomous than a rattler. A bite is followed by violent nausea and terrible convulsions that sometimes end in death.

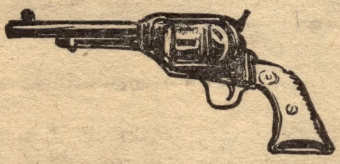
Mrs. Songer has developed a professional unconcern of the dangers of her work. She has been bitten several times, she says. Not by her "pet" spiders, but by bold, bad "wild" ones taken on black widow roundups in the vicinity of her home.

There's an unfailing supply of "maverick" spiders, free for whoever wants them. They are especially numerous in and around old outbuildings, in wall crevices and shrubbery. The black widow builds a ragged, careless-looking web, unlike the symmetrical job turned out by other spiders, or the funnel-shaped insect trap characteristic of the gray garden spider.

Deadlier Than the Male

In "nesting" season, when guarding its young, the black widow is vicious and quick to attack. One of the unlovely traits of the female is to bite and kill her mate once she has no further use for him in the process of reproduction. So there is a certain amount of consolation in being a male of the human species, at that.

But to get back to the webs, here again, as in the case of Colonel Colt's famous product,



the old-fashioned article is unbeatable. All manner of artificial substitutes have been tried for cross hairs. Some were too brittle to withstand the shock of heavy gunfire, other material shrank or stretched with temperature changes, thus destroying accuracy. Or else deteriorated rapidly.

So far, according to Mrs. Songer, nothing has been found to beat natural spider web. It is superfine, just flexible enough, and stronger than any other known material of equal size.

And the very best of all spider web is that spun by the vicious, venomous black widow. Which goes to prove that even the orneriest critters of creation generally have some useful purpose or other.

He Asked Permission to Stay

Major William E. Barber, USMC

EIGHT THOUSAND marines lay besieged at Yudam-ni; three thousand more were at Hagaru-ri, preparing a breakthrough. Guarding a frozen mountain pass between them, Major Barber, with only a company, held their fate in his hands. Encirclement threatened him. But he asked permission to stay, and for five days he held the pass against attack. When relief came, only eighty-four men could walk away. But Major Barber had saved a division.

"I know," says Major Barber, "that you realize what hard jobs our men are doing in America's armed forces. Maybe you *haven't* realized that you're *helping* those men — whenever you invest in Defense Bonds. For Bonds strengthen our economy — to produce the arms and food and care that make our men secure."

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WESTERNETTES

A Roundup of Range News Oddities

By

HAROLD HELFER

Wagering a drinking partner that he could run 100 yards around a stake and return to the starting point faster than a man on a horse, George Warren, an Arizona prospector, lost his interest in the Copper Queen, which ultimately would have made a $20,000,000 fortune for him. Moral: beware of spirited drink—unless you can run faster than a horse.

All's well that ends well, they say, but the law in Hillsboro, Texas, recently sunk pretty low when a couple of deputies, Ben Curbo and C. L. Harrison, went down into a 50-foot well to serve a summons on a man.

Trouble comes double in Colorado, and as proof positive of this we offer the discovery made by Frank Revas near the metropolis of Gary—a rattlesnake with two heads.

You don't have to grab a slow boat to China to go to Mongolia. There's a town by that name in New Mexico.

During the oil boom at Ranger, Texas, water was so scarce it was drained from automobile radiators for bathing purposes and then put back into the radiators. Which offered a goodly excuse to many a Texan reeking of alcohol—merely anti-freeze from the radiators, you know.

Abilene, Kansas, famed as the frontier head of the old Chisholm cattle trail and one of the roughest, toughest, wildest and most unGodly of early-day Western towns, incongruously bore a Biblical name. It was first called Abilene, meaning "grassy plain," by a devout woman settler.

The first school teacher at Fort Davis, Texas, back in 1883, was pleasantly amazed at the unselfish lending of toys, books, etcetera, by the children of the fort garrison. However, she came mighty near to being disillusioned one day, after catching a boy noisily masticating the new-fangled chewing gum in school.

"Elmer," she said sternly, "step outside and throw that gum away this minute!"

"I can't, teacher."

"What do you mean 'you can't?' "

" 'Cause the gum ain't mine. It's the Blant kids'. I just borry'd it."

America's first department store was built not in the East, as would seem most logical, but in the West. It was Zion's Store in Salt Lake City, established in the year 1868. Enough said.

Folks said a young army couldn't stop the big

Border gang plundering this far corner of Texas—

and the Lone Wolf had only a couple of helpers

BORDER SMOKE

A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER I

Mountain Storm

IT HAD begun to snow earlier, the flakes large and soft and lazy, but that had been nothing to worry about except as a forewarning. Jim Hatfield had expected to reach a cabin in a sheltered valley he remembered, before the storm broke. But he was still on the mountain trail above it when the blizzard struck with sudden fury.

Sleetlike snow, smoking and swirling, stung and blinded him, and lashing wind beat upon his tall, broad frame and tore the breath from his lungs. The great sorrel beneath him stayed calm and steady, but both horse and rider were soon glazed with a thickening crust of ice, smothered and buffeted by the wind-whipped snow. Lost, helpless, and in danger of freezing to death in this mountain wilderness east of El Paso.

In winter weather Hatfield should have stuck to the lowlands, but he wanted to see if the Cano band had a hideout in these mountains, and he had expected to beat the first bad storms of the season. Now, head bent to the howling blast, hat tugging at his chin-strap, the big Ranger shivered inside his sheepskin-lined jacket, the intense cold knifing through him.

He had been fairly close to the pass leading down into the valley he wanted, and with luck he might make it, although he could barely see the head of his horse, Goldy, in front of him in the dense gusty grayness. By instinct more than anything else, Hatfield guided the sorrel onward, the force of the gale almost ripping him bodily from the saddle.

In occasional brief lulls he searched hungrily for landmarks, but the snow blotted them out again before Hatfield could be certain. Caught like the rankest greenhorn, he thought wryly. Cap'n Bill McDowell would sure be disgusted, if he could see the Ranger the old man himself had dubbed the Lone Wolf, in this sorry predicament.

The pass should be in this direction. It had to be. Bucking the wind and snow, Goldy plodded on with Hatfield hunched and agonized in icy leather. Gradually his anguish faded into deadly warning numbness. He was close to despair when he glimpsed a vague blurred breach in the solid white barrier before him. The notch of the pass! Once in it he couldn't miss the basin and the cabin below—*if* the cabin still stood.

THERE was some relief in the defile, and Goldy made good time on the downgrade into the small mountain-rimmed bowl where a creek had run beside a sturdy log hut. Pray God it was still there!

In the sunken valley the violence of the storm lessened, but visibility wasn't much better. When the sorrel shied suddenly, Jim Hatfield saw gratefully that they had nearly run into the log wall in the blind white welter of the blizzard. He got down stiffly, found the door, and led the horse inside. The cabin was like an ice-box, but it seemed warm with the savage elements shut out.

Kindling and chunks of wood were piled in a corner. With numb, awkward hands Hatfield finally got a blaze started in the fireplace. Man and horse were soon steaming, as the snow and ice melted off them, and when his fingers were functioning right again Hatfield removed saddle and bridle from the sorrel.

"Lucky again, Goldy," he murmured. "Once more the wolves miss out on us. But if we hadn't hit that pass, horse, we'd have been finished for sure."

Premature darkness had come in mid-afternoon. Hatfield lighted a coal-oil lamp, hung a grain bag on Goldy's muzzle, and began preparing some food for himself. The one-room cabin was fairly spacious, fitted with a crude bench and table, packing-boxes for chairs, and a built-in double bunk with rope springs. With the fire crackling cheerfully, the lamp flickering yellow, saddle-bags opened and bedroll unrolled, the place became pleasant and homelike, while the storm was tearing and snarling futilely at the stout log walls.

Stripped down in the delicious warmth, Jim Hatfield had his meal and lounged back with a cigarette to contemplate this mission of his to El Paso, in the extreme western corner of Texas. "Hell's Hottest Corner," as it was sometimes called, was located in a narrow projecting point between Old Mexico and New Mexico—El Paso del Norte, the Spanish had called it, where the Rio Grande made its break through the mountains. Just across the river was the Mexican settlement of Juarez.

Ranger Captain Rube Coldwell was having his troubles in El Paso, with his force decimated and American and Mexican outlaws shuttling back and forth across the Border. Coldwell had no jurisdiction south of the Rio Grande, of course, and the Rurales would not cooperate with the Texas Rangers.

The most vicious and ruthless of the bandits was the Max Cano gang which murdered, robbed and pillaged on both

sides of the Line, striking and vanishing instantly into the Mexican quarter of El Paso, or across the river in Juarez. Coldwell just didn't have the manpower to cope with the lawless. He now had only three Rangers left in his command, the others having disappeared one or two at a time in Old Mexico.

In desperation Rube Coldwell had appealed to Captain "Roaring Bill" McDowell at Ranger headquarters in Austin. Unable to spare any large detail, Cap'n Bill

JIM HATFIELD AND GOLDY

had dispatched his tophand, Ranger Jim Hatfield, to the assistance of Coldwell. Three of Hatfield's associates—Milt Travers, Red Bouchard and Fox Edley—who were tracing smugglers up the Rio Grande, would join Hatfield in El Paso as soon as feasible.

But throttling lawbreakers in a thin Border strip that was more Mexican than American was bound to be a momentous undertaking. And it was complicated by the proximity and accessibility of the international boundary line there.

Halfway through a second cigarette, Jim Hatfield thought he heard cattle bawling somewhere outside, but decided it was only the crying of wind torrents in the pass above. Putting on jacket, hat and gloves, he took a pail and plunged into the boiling whiteness outdoors, to break scum ice and dip a pailful of aching-cold water. On the way back the wind brought, along with its own heavy hurtling roar, the unmistakable bleating bawls of a herd, lost and panicky and freezing up there in the mountainside pass.

AT THE cabin door Hatfield fired a couple of shots into the air. Answering thuds floated back through the snowstorm a minute later. Some unfortunate crew and its stock was bogged down in the cut.

What a time of year to be trail-driving cattle in these barren uplands, Hatfield thought. He saddled up again, though dreading the idea of again going out into the biting teeth of that blizzard. But it had to be done. Anyone strange to this country would blunder right by this cabin in such a storm—if they got this far alive.

The snow was much deeper than when he had ridden into the valley, and it took a big, powerful, rangy horse like his golden sorrel to make headway through the billowing drifts. Hatfield pointed Goldy for the foot of the pass, and made himself as small as possible in the saddle.

In the first few minutes of exposure the cold struck wickedly through his clothes. Those riders, he thought, must be in bad shape by this time. He had morbid visions of frozen faces and ears, hands and feet. But they must have found some shelter higher up, or they never would have made it this far down the mountain.

Hatfield found the mouth of the pass and Goldy began climbing, the bite of the wind slackening here between the rocky walls. He came upon a wallowing ice-encrusted team hauling a hooded wagon, and behind it lumbered another team and lurching wagon. Steers and riders emerged from the white smother of snow, ploughing wearily along in the wake of the wagons.

"Cabin down below!" Hatfield yelled. "I'll lead you in!" He wheeled back to pass the two vehicles and pull up beside the front one, shouting, "Follow me! There's shelter in the valley!"

He pushed Goldy on ahead, backtracking throught the white mounds. The bundled snow-plastered figures on the wagon seats looked like women, he thought, wondering what a family outfit could be doing up in these highlands in the winter. A whole layout on the move apparently, lock, stock and barrel.

When they drew up before the log cabin Hatfield saw that they *were* women, mother and daughter evidently, and virtually frozen to the wagon seats. He pried them loose, lifted them down, helped them inside, and threw more wood on the fire. Except for being nearly petrified with cold, they seemed to be all right, smiling with numb, blue lips as they thanked him. The girl was good-looking, Hatfield thought. The older lady was, too, for that matter.

Outside four men were dismounting with difficulty, their movements stiff and wooden in their snow-sheathed clothing.

"Where's Arizona?" Hatfield heard one of them ask.

"He was back with the drag," another man answered. "But he ought to be in now. The cattle are all down here."

The men were too cold and exhausted to unsaddle and unharness at present, so Hatfield told them to leave their ponies with Goldy in the adjacent shed, and herded the men into the warmth of the cabin. The cattle were huddled together for warmth in the lee of an overhanging cliff, protected from the wind and snow. Better than a thousand head, the Ranger estimated. A good-sized herd.

Inside, the men removed gloves and boots and outer garments, and rubbed their hands and feet. When they were thawed out somewhat, a lanky, gaunt man older than the others looked at Hatfield.

"Got to go back and get Arizona, mister. He must be in trouble."

"Better let me go," Hatfield said quietly. "I'm warm and rested."

"We're obliged to you already," the lanky man said, extending his hand. "My name's Ashley. This is what's left of our Anvil spread up in New Mexico."

"Hatfield," the Ranger said, shaking hands with the rancher. "You folks have been through enough. Rest easy here now. I'll find your rider."

"Hatfield?" Ashley said thoughtfully. "A Ranger maybe? The one they call the Lone Wolf?" A smile spread across his gaunt features. "I'm sure proud and happy to meet you. Ranger Hatfield, this is my wife Amanda and my daughter Donna. And these boys are Cobb—Mullen—and Val Verde."

JIM HATFIELD nodded politely to the women and shook hands with the Anvil cowboys. "What happened to your ranch, Mr. Ashley?"

"Burned out," Ashley said. "Max Cano's bunch drove us off the range. Don't know why they left the herd, unless they were too busy to round it up."

"Heard a lot about this Cano," Hatfield said. "Hope to meet up with him before long. Right now I'll be riding back to get Arizona."

"I'm going with you, Ranger." That was the tough, dark, wiry and bow-legged little Val Verde. "Arizona's my best friend." He glanced beseechingly at Ashley.

"Go ahead, Val," said the rancher. "You're in better shape than the rest of us."

The two men went out, mounted, and rode back toward the pass in the blowing snow. Hatfield asked Val Verde why they hadn't holed up somewhere above.

"No place for the stock," Val said. "Found a prospector's shack, good enough for us, but there wasn't any shelter for the cattle. So we came on, trying to save the herd. It's all old Ash's got left."

Near the foot of the pass they met a riderless bronc, saddle askew and flank gashed and bleeding through a film of ice.

"His," Val said. "Must of fell in the rocks. We got to hurry, Ranger."

Fighting the slash of wind and sleet,

they climbed the passage, peering through the white bluster, one on either side of the trail. Three-quarters of the way up, Hatfield spotted something dark in a little gully below the road. It was Arizona, half-buried in drifting snow, unconscious, but alive. Frozen blood marked his head and face, but Hatfield didn't think he was badly injured. The worst danger was from exposure. They dragged him carefully up into the trail, and hoisted him across Goldy's back in front of the pommel.

"He'll be all right, Verde," assured the Ranger. Climbing on, he held the senseless man in place.

"If he ain't there's going to be a lot of dead Mexes around El Paso," Verde said quickly.

Back in the cabin, after what seemed like an endless blind battle against the raging screaming storm, they laid Arizona on the lower bunk and Jim Hatfield went to work over him, with the others helping under the Ranger's directions.

It was necessary to strip and rub Arizona down, vigorously and thoroughly, in an effort to restore circulation. The head injury was slight, and Hatfield soon had that cleansed, dressed, and bandaged. The threat of pneumonia gave them the gravest worry.

Hatfield fed Arizona quinine from the medical kit in his saddle-bags, and put a hot plaster of mustard and flour on the cowboy's chest. He worked on the patient for hours, while the other men unharnessed the teams, unsaddled their horses, gathered more firewood, brought water from the creek, and did other chores.

Donna Ashley and her mother aided Hatfield as best they could. And the girl's blue eyes were constantly on the Ranger's fine dark head and strong, somber profile.

"Why, you're better than some doctors I've seen on the range," she declared once.

Hatfield smiled and shook his head. "Just a few things I picked up here and there, from doctors and vets and midwives and nurses."

"You're going to save his life, though."

"Arizona's strong and healthy," Hatfield said. "That'll save him—if anything can."

When Hatfield finally arose and washed his hands, in response to Amanda Ashley's call to supper, he said:

"The boy's breathing easier and better. I think maybe he'll pull through."

"We sure owe you a lot, Jim Hatfield," said Mrs. Ashley.

"Not a thing, ma'am, beyond this excellent supper," Hatfield assured her with his easy smile.

"If you're going to El Paso, maybe you'll ride along with us when it lets up so's we can go on," Ashley suggested hopefully.

"Glad to," the big Ranger agreed readily.

Val Verde grinned at him. "I just hope Cano's crew tries to jump us on the way in, Jim Hatfield."

CHAPTER II

Winter Trail Drive

DURING the night the storm subsided and the plaintive bawling of cattle filled the basin. Morning dawned clear and cold, the sun rising pale and heatless, but gaining color and warmth as it climbed the eastern sky.

As the snow began to melt, the cattle foraged through it for grass. The creek ran full and overflowed its banks. The willows along the stream glittered with ice, shedding bright crystal drops as the ice slowly melted. The horses muzzled into softening snow to crop grass. All around the valley the peaks were frosted white and brilliant against the light blue horizon.

The cowboy called Arizona was conscious, rational, and vastly improved though still weak. His partner Val Verde, overjoyed, was almost worshipful of Hatfield. In a couple of days Arizona would be able to travel in a wagon bed. The Anvil outfit and the stock needed to rest and recuperate, and Hatfield himself could do with a respite, having ridden nearly seven hundred miles since leaving Austin.

Jim Hatfield came to know and like these people in short order, and he as quickly earned their respect, admiration and devotion. The Ashleys were obviously a fine family, honest and sincere, generous and considerate. The love and loyalty their four riders held for them was a testimonial to their worth. The cowboys were almost like sons to the Ashleys, bent on riding it out with Ash whether or not he could pay their wages. It was unusual, and touching to see such a close-knit outfit.

"Hate to sell this herd, Jim, but I don't know what else to do with it," Ashley confided to the Ranger. He was a solemn man, with steady, sunken eyes and hollow, leathery cheeks. "No range, no grass to run 'em on. I haven't got any money to buy a spread. In fact, I'm flat broke, Jim, until I sell the stock, and Huffnail and Millhauser in El Paso are supposed to be paying top prices."

"Maybe you'll find a layout you can lease, Ash," said Hatfield. He had fallen into the habit of using the affectionate name the crew had for their boss. In turn, they all called him "Jim." "Understand quite a few ranchers around El Paso have lost so many cattle to the Border rustlers that they're giving up and pulling out."

"Well, we'll see," Ashley said patiently. "The first thing is to get 'em into town safe."

"We'll get 'em in, Ash. It's only a short drive from here. Two days on the trail will do it."

"I guess we can't complain much," sighed Ashley. "That Cano bunch don't often leave anybody alive, when they hit a place. We're lucky to be living and have our herd. But it goes against the grain, it hurts considerable, to be driven out of your own home by that bunch of Mex bandits."

Hatfield nodded. "They've got a lot to answer for, when we run them down, Ash."

Donna Ashley paused at the edge of the shed to watch Hatfield curry and brush Goldy's thick winter coat. "What a beautiful horse, Jim," she murmured. She was sincere in her admiration of the sorrel, but plainly more interested in Goldy's rider.

"Don't know what I'd do without him," Hatfield told her, rubbing a rich sheen into the golden hide. "As good as he is handsome, which is more than you can say for most people, Donna."

Though wearing men's range garb, and strong, active and competent, the girl was still wholly feminine, slim, but nicely curved and graceful. She had lustrous brown hair, frank, clear blue eyes, and a sunny smile that lighted her pretty face, tanned almost to a bronze. Most men were attracted to Donna Ashley at once, but this big dark Ranger had a quiet aloofness that was new to her, yet intrigued her. But since he seemed to have so little to say she turned away from him with a laugh and light banter for Val Verde, Cobb and Mullen, while Hatfield went on grooming his magnificent sorrel.

ON THEIR second day in the valley the weather was warmer. With most of the snow going fast, the stock grazed and filled up at will on the grassland. Arizona already was sitting up and eating with some appetite. The danger past, strength was returning to his sinewy whiplike body. He called Hatfield "Doc" affectionately, with his gay, reckless grin, so like Val Verde's, and as difficult to resist.

The other two hands, Cobb and Mullen, were a bit older and more settled. They were affable enough, but lacked the youthful exuberance of Arizona and Val.

Youngsters who had acquired such names were generally gunfighters, Hatfield knew, and Arizona and Val Verde were no exceptions. Undoubtedly they had ridden for fighting wages and had left trouble and reputations somewhere behind them, but they were good boys for Jim Hatfield's money. They were all right, or they would not be working for Ashley.

The next morning they started out, the women driving on ahead with the wagons, Arizona bedded down in the back of the second wagon, with Donna on the seat and Jim Hatfield riding escort. Behind them Ashley lured out his old lead steer

and built his point. They threw the herd into motion, with Cobb and Mullen swinging on the flanks and Val Verde bringing up the drag.

The trail along which Hatfield led them was bare and dry, for the most part, but the heights around them still gleamed white with snow.

Now and then Hatfield dropped back to talk with Mrs. Ashley and her daughter, or to fall in behind the second wagon and chat with Arizona over the tail-gate.

"I'm about as much use as a burr in a horse's tail," complained Arizona, in his lazy drawl. "Could just as well be riding a saddle, but old Doc Hatfield likes to pamper and baby his patients, it seems like. So this tophand is just so much extra baggage."

Donna tried to hold Hatfield, whenever he jogged alongside her, asking all sorts of questions about the Rangers, El Paso, himself and Goldy, everything she could summon up. Once, when she showed a consuming interest in knowing all about the country he told her:

"El Paso del Norte lies on a mesa at the foot of Mount Franklin, with the Rio Grande flowing between it and Juarez, Mexico. One of the first white men to use the pass was probably the Spanish explorer, Oñate, a couple of hundred years ago. The old Chihuahua Trail followed his route from that Old Mexico pueblo up to Santa Fé."

The girl's blue eyes sparkled with interest. "Can't you see them, Jim? The Spanish conquistadores in their armor, hunting for treasures in this New World! Tell me more."

"Don't know much more, Donna," said Hatfield. "Except that that notched mountain pass has always been used and known as a landmark. The old Comanche horse-stealers and Apache raiders rode through it. The Butterfield stage line and the Goodnight-Loving cattle trail followed it —and the railroad will."

"You're so well-informed, Jim!" she enthused.

Hatfield shrugged his broad shoulders. "Not as well as I should be."

He smiled, raised his hat, and rode away, on past the lead wagon to survey the trail ahead. Donna stared after the tall, rangy figure on the golden horse until he passed from view.

In the afternoon Hatfield fell back to ride beside Ashley at the point of the herd. It was snowing again, but lightly and softly at this lower altitude, with none of the unleashed ferocity of the mountain snowstorm. While they were talking a bend in the broad canyon brought the wagons in sight, halted in the trail with a half-dozen Mexican-looking horsemen alongside.

Ashley lifted his arm, checked the lead steers, and drew his rifle from its scabbard. "Looks like some of Cano's, Jim!"

Hatfield unbuttoned his jacket to clear the holstered Colts, and Cobb and Mullen rode up from their swing positions to the point.

"Maybe they just wanted us to drive this herd in for them," Ashley said drily.

COBB squinted through the filtering whiteness and spat tobacco juice. "Taddeo and Fasano—and that Pablito gunnie. Want us to take 'em, Ash?"

Ashley shook his head. "Wait and see. They might throw down on the womenfolks if we start anything."

They spread out and cantered forward, four men against six, but with Arizona hidden in the back of the rear wagon.

Ashley said quietly to Hatfield, "Taddeo, big for a Mex, lighter colored, wearing our kind of clothes. Fasano, weasel-sharp and slick, with the bright colors and conchas. And Pablito, the hoptoad-looking one, a notorious killer. Don't know the rest, but they're all Cano's boys."

Hatfield was thinking, If I had three Rangers with me—say, Bouchard and Edley and Travers—we'd take them right here. But not this way, not with the Ashley women on the wagons and Arizona still sick and weak. It will have to wait, unless they open up. In time they'll lead me to the big ones, to Max Cano and the others higher up.

The Mexicans were surprised, and not pleasurably, to find a big, bleak-faced,

gunslung stranger with the Anvil crew. Cool and wary, they eyed Hatfield, reading what he was in the set of his dark head and powerful shoulders, in the lines of his grave, rugged face, the green eyes changing to icy gray, and his whole easy assured manner.

Much man, this one, bad with those two Colt guns. Arizona and Val Verde were missing, but this big one had more menace than both those kids together. A great deal more, in the wise, knowing eyes of Taddeo and Fasano. Only the squat ugly madman, Pablito, was eager to test this tall gringo on the stallion of gold.

"You have a new hand, Señor Ashley?" asked Taddeo, his tone courteous and unaccented, his smile serene and charming. "We are happy to see that you survived the blizzard—and saved your cattle. We had thought to be of assistance perhaps."

"What do you want here?" Ashley asked coldly.

"Why, nothing, my friend," Taddeo said, smooth as silk. "Simply an exchange of friendly greetings on the road to El Paso. We regret the unfortunate fire on your ranch, Ashley. We act only on orders, you see."

"Get out," Ashley said quietly, goaded into fury by the mockery.

"You are hostile, my friend," Taddeo smiled. "We do not want your herd, Ashley. We would have taken it before, if that had been our intention. You may proceed without fear."

Val Verde was coming up from the rear at a gallop now, and that balanced the odds even better for the Anvil. Fasano fingered his mustache and glanced about in search of Arizona.

"We waste time here," Fasano said, the tiny silver bells on his steeple sombrero tinkling at the impatient jerk of his sleek head. "Let's ride, amigos."

"Ees no hurry," Pablito protested. Urging his pony forward he peered at Hatfield insolently. "Thees hombre I have eenterest een." A leer crinkled his evil, froglike countenance. His right elbow angled wide, and his right hand hung spread-fingered.

"Come on, Pablito," said Fasano, but the stumpy killer ignored him.

"You want me to draw?" Hatfield asked evenly.

"Why not, *caballero?*"

"Just the two of us?"

"Ees enough," Pablito said, his right hand streaking to his holster.

Goldy swung suddenly close to the Mexican's pony, and Jim Hatfield's right-hand gun leaped clear and high, the barrel slashing the peaked sombrero flat before Pablito's weapon left the leather. Pablito grunted and slumped forward over the pommel. Hatfield turned his Colt on the other Mexicans, but they were not making a move.

"Pablito is a fool," Taddeo said contemptuously. "Tie him in the saddle, Chico, and lead his horse." He smiled winningly at Hatfield. "I apologize for the folly of our *compadre*. He is without sense. Completely now, since you pistol-whipped him with such speed and skill. Perhaps it will beat some of the boasting out of him. If not, it would have been better if you'd shot him."

THIS Taddeo is the bad one of the lot, Hatfield thought. He will take considerable killing one of these days, Taddeo will. And the fancy Fasano too. That pair and Max Cano for sure, and how many others?

At that instant Donna screamed from the wagon seat, and Arizona's carbine crashed and flamed over the tail-gate. Hatfield brought Goldy around and saw a seventh Mexican stumbling brokenly out of the mesquite in which he'd taken cover to draw a bead on the Ranger's back. Arizona fired again, and the Mexican tripped and fell headlong over his rifle with his face in the reddish soil, sprinkled white with snow now.

Ashley had his carbine lined, and his three riders had leveled their hand-guns, but the Mexicans showed no inclination to draw and fight. Taddeo was cursing Pablito and the dead sniper, disclaiming all responsibility for their insane actions. Chico had the unconscious Pablito roped secure-

Swaying on splayed feet, Fasano tried to straighten

ly in the saddle and was back on his own horse.

"Señores, I regret exceedingly—" Taddeo began.

"We ought to kill you all!" Ashley cut in, harsh and bitter. "If the women weren't here, by hell, we'd shoot you all down, like the dirty, rotten yellow dogs you are! Clear out before we do!"

"What's holding us, Ash?" snarled Val Verde, thumb-joint whitened on the hammer of his Colt. "Why don't we open up?"

Ashley wagged his head, as if in pain. "We can't, Val. Not cold-blooded—not with the women here."

"My blood ain't cold, Boss," Mullen said wryly. "But I reckon you're right."

"He's right," Jim Hatfield said. "Let 'em go. Their time'll come."

"*Andale!*" cried Taddeo. "Come on, fools, before you get us all killed!"

"Don't you want your sharp-shooter?" Val Verde yelled jeeringly.

Fasano laughed and gestured. "Let him rot! Let the buzzards have him!" The Mexicans rode off toward the hills in the south, with Chico leading Pablito's mount. The horse of the dead sniper broke out of the brush and trotted after them.

Jim Hatfield said, "Thanks, Arizona. That was nice shooting."

"Easy shot, Doc." Arizona grinned at him from the tail-board of the wagon. "Don't know why I needed two. Maybe I'm still kind of feeble and bleary."

"Bet Pablito never got gunwhipped before," Cobb said, looking at Hatfield with something like awe. "He's supposed to be all-hell with a sixgun."

Ashley spoke briefly with his wife and daughter, then wheeled back to his men. "Let's get the herd moving, boys."

"I'll stay with the wagons, Ash," said Hatfield. "But I don't think they'll come back."

"We'll be close behind you anyway,

Jim," said Ashley.

They had no more trouble from the Mexicans, but snow slowed their progress. It was on the third afternoon on the trail when they saw the deep-notched pass in the mountains before them, the slopes dropping steeply to the banks of the Rio Grande, which looked meager and insignificant here. That evening, as the lights of El Paso blurred amber in the wintry gloom of the mesa below Mt. Franklin, they punched the herd into the Huffnail-Millhauser Stockyards. Ashley had ridden ahead to make the necessary arrangements.

"Is Captain Coldwell in town?" Hatfield asked an attendant.

"The Ranger captain?" The man looked at him strangely. "He is dead, dead and buried, mister."

"Dead?" Hatfield stared incredulously. "Who killed him?"

"He killed himself."

"Rube Coldwell? Don't you ever believe that!"

The stockyard man smiled inscrutably under his drooping mustache. "I never quite did, mister. But they called it suicide."

CHAPTER III

Dead-End in El Paso

ALL the evidence Jim Hatfield was able to glean seemed to confirm that Rube Coldwell, health and nerves collapsing under the strain of fighting phantom-like enemies who flitted to and fro across the Border, had died by his own hand.

After the Ashley party and Hatfield found rooms in the Pueblo Hotel, the Ranger went at once to the sheriff's office in the jailhouse, as soon as he had learned that Coldwell's three Rangers were out on the trail of Cano's cutthroats.

"There's no question about it, Hatfield," Sheriff Kriewald, a bony, gray man with a lipless mouth and lantern jaws, told him. "Mrs. Coldwell found him herself, in the office he had in their house. Shot through the heart, his gun beside him, one shot fired from it."

"But what could drive a man like Rube Coldwell to that?" Hatfield asked wonderingly.

"Many things," Kriewald declared philosophically. "Rube was a good man, a fine officer, but he was working against hopeless odds here. We all are, Hatfield. The river, the Border, is too handy. Your criminals are across it before you even hear about the crime. Coldwell was conscientious, and he couldn't stand failure."

"How's his wife taking it?"

"Hard, but brave. She has three small children, you know. Coldwell left some money, but probably not enough." Kriewald sighed, and placed a pellet of snuff under his tongue. "A sad case, Hatfield, but life on the frontier is full of such tragedies."

"I'll go and see her," Hatfield said unhappily.

Kriewald rose with him. "First I want you to meet some of our leading citizens, Hatfield. Probably find 'em in the mayor's office. They backed Coldwell a hundred per cent, and they'll support you the same way."

They went out and crossed the plaza toward an imposing adobe edifice. A ceaseless wind blew snow and grit across the bare benches and empty bandstand, rattling the branches of the chinaberry trees. Ice skimmed the water in the horse trough. Lamps glowed frostily in the gusty darkness, and the bell-towers of churches and missions stood high against the steel-pointed stars.

Kriewald led the way upstairs to a large, elegant office overlooking the plaza, and introduced Jim Hatfield to the three well-dressed cigar-smoking gentlemen who lounged there, whisky glasses in hand.

Mayor Essling, plump and bald, red-faced and beaming, was the perfect politician as he shook hands, slapped the Ranger's shoulder, and gave him a drink and a cigar. Milo Bascom, attorney, was

a younger and tougher man, with a direct challenging glance and a firm muscular handshake. Leo Fribance, superintendent of the copper smelter, was about Bascom's age and even more immaculate and debonair.

All three were friendly and respectful enough, yet there was a shade of smug self-importance about them that rubbed Hatfield the wrong way. They seemed a trifle condescending toward a man who carried guns for a living.

But there was nothing at which Hatfield could take offense. They appeared genuinely grieved over Coldwell's death, solicitous for his widow and children, and anxious to aid the Ranger in any manner possible. They agreed that Max Cano was behind most of the rampant lawlessness in the region, and warned Hatfield about Cano's prowess with weapons. Max Cano was without doubt, each agreed, the best—or worst—man on this Border with sixguns, carbine, or knife.

"Hasn't anyone tried to take him?" asked Hatfield.

"There's no charge, no evidence against him," Milo Bascom said. "Cano is seldom seen, and never in connection with any lawbreaking. He operates behind the scenes, always under cover and legally in the clear. His men strike on this side and cross to Jaurez. We can't touch them there, although the Rangers have tried to. The Rurales are afraid to. A full regiment is required to control this situation, and we have a mere handful of Rangers and local peace officers."

HATFIELD examined his fragrant cigar. "It is rumored that Cano has friends in high places, on both sides of the Border."

"Rumors!" Mayor Essling laughed barkingly, his red face jovial, stubby hands making a gesture of disparagement. "There are always such rumors. Men of means and power are forever being accused of corruption, but where would we be without intelligent leadership?"

"You're right, Mayor," Jim Hatfield said gravely. "And I'm glad to find El Paso in the hands of such capable civic leaders."

Essling barked again, with becoming modesty, "Didn't mean to pat myself and my friends on the back, Ranger Hatfield. But we do the best we can under the circumstances. The Mexican quarter is a problem, of course. Cano is supposed to have a hideout there, but you'd have to tear those 'dobes all down to find it. Those Mexicans stick together."

Hatfield stood up, dark and towering. "My thanks to you gentlemen. Meeting you has been a pleasure. If you'll excuse me now, I must go and call on Mrs. Coldwell." He waved a general farewell.

But as he turned out of the room, it was with the feeling that they'd be discussing him the minute the door closed at his back. Well, that was their privilege. He had more important things on his mind. Politicians, lawyers and business executives got to be like old women, gossiping with malicious barbed tongues about everybody and everything.

The angular adobe ugliness of the town was softened by snow, shadows and mellow lamplight. El Paso was growing, Hatfield observed. Horses and wagons lined the hitch-racks. Laughter and music issued from saloons and cantinas. Mission bells tolled in the dark, mysterious depths of the Mexican section, and spicy cooking scented the air.

On his way out to the Coldwell home, dreading the interview with Sue Coldwell, Hatfield crossed frozen snow-drifted *acequias* and passed stiff dry soapweed, seeds clacking in withered pods as the breeze struck. Rube, he was thinking, had been dead over a week now. Perhaps Sue had weathered the worst of her loss and grief.

The whitewashed adobe, windows aglow, stood near the northern outskirts. Once more it seemed impossible that Rube Coldwell would be dead, a suicide. Hatfield felt the desolate loneliness that always came whenever a good man and comrade died.

He walked in between tall, leafless pop-

lars, the wind sighing mournfully through the bare limbs.

Sue Coldwell opened the door, as striking as he remembered her with her dark hair and clear gray eyes and proud features. Drawn and refined from suffering, now, they were close to real beauty. For an instant something like shock and fear showed in her face, then she was in his arms, face buried on his wide chest, sobbing quietly:

"Oh, Jim, Jim! I'm glad it's you. I'm glad you're here, Jim!"

He tried to console and soothe her, holding her with gentle firmness. The woman was full-bodied against him, lush and ripe, and Hatfield was dismayed by his own quick thought, She won't be a widow long. She's too much woman, too full of life and emotion, too exquisitely shaped and fashioned for love. He cut the thought off quickly.

Sue Coldwell drew him inside, seated him in the cheerful homelike parlor, and brought him a drink of the *mescal de pechuga* that Rube had liked so well. Hatfield welcomed the fiery spreading burn of it tonight. The children were in bed, which Jim thought fortunate, and he and Sue talked for a long time in the soft lamplight, sharing the great loss that had left this house empty.

She was taking it better than Hatfield had anticipated, with an almost fatalistic calm and resignation. Her first wild bitter grief must have worn itself out. Sue was young, strong, smart, and very much alive. Most of her life was ahead of her, and she had to go on living, for herself as well as the children. A fine brave girl, he thought. She will marry again, and rightly so. Let's hope she gets as good a man as Rube Coldwell was.

SUE could tell him little more than he already knew about Rube's death. It had been late at night. She and the kids were in bed, and Rube had been working or brooding in his office, as he frequently did. He had worried himself to distraction over the job and his failure to get anywhere against the bandits.

Half-asleep, Sue had heard the shot, had rushed downstairs to the office, and there he'd been. No, he hadn't left a note or anything. She was sure nobody else had been there. Rube had done it himself. What man could take Rube's gun and hold it against his breast and shoot him with his own pistol. The thought was impossible.

"Not unless he was drugged, or knocked out or something," Hatfield said.

"There was no sign of drugs, no mark on him, except the wound." She shuddered and held both hands pressed to her face.

"Don't talk about it any more, Sue," Hatfield said kindly.

"All right, Jim," she murmured brokenly. "But you may want to see the office. It's just as he left it. I haven't touched a thing."

After taking him into the office, Sue excused herself to go and look at the children, leaving Hatfield to inspect the desk and files as he wished.

There was little of interest, nothing of particular note in the bare, orderly little room. The office had a private entrance, but no one could have come in without being heard and seen. It had been suicide all right. El Paso must be an awful hell-hole, to drive a Ranger like Rube Coldwell into taking his own life. A man with a flawless record, highly regarded throughout Texas and the Southwest. A man with a lovely young wife and three fine children.

Jim Hatfield reflected somberly, But it seems odd that he didn't leave a note, a message of some kind. Rube was a careful, efficient, thoughtful man—always figured things out to the finest detail, and liked to make thorough sensible explanations for every act and move and decision. If a man like Rube Coldwell could be harassed into suicide, he'd almost certainly leave a note to explain, justify and ask forgiveness for the deed.

Unless—and it was quite possible—he had been too mentally unbalanced at the time. What had this job at El Paso done to him?

CHAPTER IV

Lily of the Rio

LILY LAVOY, hair shimmering like spun gold, sat grandly alone at a remote corner table in the bar of the Pueblo Hotel. Every time the lobby or the outside door opened, Lily looked up, then looked away in disappointment.

The man she was waiting for was late. It had to be a man—with Lily. Many others, both acquaintances and strangers, had approached her isolated table, but Lily had dismissed them with curt contempt.

She had waited in the lobby until she could endure the boredom no longer. There she had seen the Ashleys and their riders, but no sign of Jim Hatfield, and she knew the Ranger had come to El Paso with those people. Little happened in El Paso or Juarez that Lily Lavoy didn't know about.

The Ashley girl looked nice, sweet and winsome, Lily had thought, and her parents seemed pleasant and agreeable. Arizona, with his bandaged head, was rather a romantic young figure—but too young, Lily had decided. She wasn't old enough yet to go cradle-robbing. Val Verde, tough but not unattractive, was also a youngster. The other two were run-of-the-mill cowhands, not for Lily Lavoy. Not until she faded and got desperate.

The hotel barroom was a masculine precinct, but Lily went where she pleased and did as she wanted. In spite of her lurid reputation, there was a kind of grandeur about this woman that kept most people subdued and in place. Other females lied when they said Lily's hair was bleached and dyed. It was as naturally golden blonde as her eyes were naturally jade green, and the incredibly long curling eyelashes were her own, too. For all the life she led, Lily needed no rouge to color her cheeks, and little to enhance her ripe red lips.

She was brimming, almost bursting with a health and vitality that no amount of debauchery seemed to dim. Her figure, full-blown and voluptuous, with lushly exaggerated curves and depths, was breath-taking in the scarlet gown she wore, cut low over the magnificent bosom. Lily Lavoy was a beauty. Hard and brazen and doomed perhaps, but lovely to look at.

Taddeo and Fasano came in from the street, swaggering lazily, and turned toward Lily's corner, but she waved them away with an imperious flip of her wrist.

"Still mourning for that dead Ranger," remarked Taddeo, with careless indifference. "And waiting for the new one, I'll wager. The one weakness of Lily Lavoy is for Texas Rangers. I find it difficult to comprehend."

"*Quien sabe?*" Fasano laughed. "And who cares? There's no lack of women like Lily on the Rio Grande. The Ashley señorita is another thing, amigo. Sweet as a *piloncillo*, young and tender."

When they departed, waving at Lily with languid insolence, there was hatred in her green eyes and haughty features.

Some time later the swing-doors from the lobby parted, and Jim Hatfield entered, tall and easy-moving in rough worn range garb. Standing for a moment to survey the smoky room with keen gray eyes, he had the aspect, the ruddy bronzed profile of an aristocratic fighting hawk, Lily Lavoy thought as she beckoned to him.

He came at once in long effortless strides, a fine big man that other men as well as women would turn to look after, and took off his hat as he neared the corner. His hair was crisp and black on his shapely head, and there was ease and grace in every movement he made.

"Sit down, please," Lily said, indicating the brandy bottle and extra glass. "I've been waiting some time to talk to you. You may not believe it, but I was a good friend of Rube Coldwell's."

Hatfield took a chair opposite her, wondering a bit, but saying nothing. Lily

poured brandy into his glass, asking, "Do you believe that Captain Coldwell committed suicide?"

"I find it difficult to," he admitted.

"I'm sure he didn't," Lily Lavoy declared flatly. "I'm sure he was murdered —somehow. And it was arranged to look like suicide."

"By whom then?"

"Some of the Cano gang, of course."

HATFIELD inquired, shaping and lighting a cigarette, "Would they bother to make it look like suicide?"

"In the case of a Ranger captain, yes —Mr. Hatfield." She smiled at his look of surprise, and went on, "I am Lily Lavoy. You might have heard of me, as I have heard of you." She laughed, with a note of harshness. "In our separate fields we are both well-known!"

Hatfield nodded soberly. "Have you anything definite to go on, Miss Lavoy?"

"Never mind the 'Miss.' I'm Lily from here to Chihuahua City, and probably far beyond! No, I'm sorry, I have nothing definite. But you will find that Coldwell was killed. And you will find that certain prominent citizens were involved. In that, and in all the activities of Max Cano and his men."

Hatfield was silent, twirling his glass in long fingers. This woman might have something, or what she was saying might be just because of the bitterness of a girl ostracized by society. How could he take the word of a scarlet lady against that of Sue Coldwell, the local law, and the most eminent men in El Paso?

"If you had something specific—" he said dubiously.

The green eyes flared at him. "I know. You think I'm a low-down honkytonk girl trying to drag the high muckamucks down into the gutter with me!" She was fierce, wild, and even more beautiful in her fury. "But you're wrong, Hatfield! Some day you'll learn how wrong you were. Most likely when it's too late!"

"I appreciate your telling me this, trying to help me," Hatfield said. "But I can't move blind, Lily. I need a lead, something solid to take hold of and follow."

"Did it ever occur to you that Mrs. Coldwell might have a lover?"

"I doubt it," Hatfield said. He knew now that it was pure malice with Lily Lavoy, and he discounted all she had said previously. "I've known the Coldwells for some time."

"Sure, you doubt it!" Lily said, with heat. "Everything's black and white to you, Ranger. Women are all good or all bad. Sue Coldwell's a great lady. It's only the dance-hall doxies like me who ever do wrong!"

"Please, Lily," Hatfield tried to calm her. "I'm not that stupid. I know people make mistakes, and that good ones go bad and vice versa. If you have anything to tell me, I'll be glad to listen."

"Never mind, mister," Lily Lavoy said, freezing up, as cold and hard now as solid ice. "Sorry I bothered you. It won't happen again."

"Don't be like that, Lily. If Sue *did* have another man though, that might have made Rube kill himself."

"*Nothing* could've made Rube Coldwell kill himself," Lily said, with positive finality. "If you knew him, as well as you claim, you'd know that, Ranger! But forget it, forget all about it. Run along and say your prayers and go to bed like a nice little boy!" She gestured in scornful dismissal.

Hatfield rose and bowed slightly. "I'm sorry. Good night, Lily."

He left the barroom and returned to the lobby.

Lily Lavoy started up as if to hasten after him, then sank back into her chair and poured a long drink of brandy. As she raised the glass, she caught a fleeting glimpse of two dark smiling faces above the outer batwing doors—Taddeo and Fasano, instantly fading from sight.

Lily wondered if they had seen her talking to Hatfield. A sinking sensation of fear turned her cold, ill and hollow and shaken. She gulped the liquor, but it was like so much water. She filled the glass again and drank deeply, her hand

trembling and the glass clicking against her white teeth.

Jim Hatfield did not stop in the lobby, nor did he climb the stairs to his room. He went outside to walk and think in the windy, light-splashed plaza. He felt that he had missed something with Lily Lavoy, had handled the matter poorly and lost what she had meant to give him. Despite her flamboyant nature and reputation, Lily somehow impressed and appealed to Hatfield. She wasn't entirely bad, by any means. Lots of good women went wrong on the frontier. Sometimes fate or luck as much as anything was responsible.

IT WAS possible that Sue Coldwell had fallen in love with some other man. Rube had been away from home most of the time. A Ranger shouldn't marry, anyway, until he was through with active duty. Hatfield had thought the Coldwells were an ideal couple, but El Paso might have changed and twisted and ruined that.

If she did have a lover, who could it be? An outlaw, a Ranger, a prosperous rising young man like Bascom or Fribance?

The snow had ceased falling and the wind was lessening. In the night Mt. Franklin loomed like a massive white tower in the moonlight above the pass. Hatfield had circled the plaza again, brain working as he walked, when a thin, shrill cry came to him from the direction of the Mexican quarter. A girl or a young boy screaming, "Help! Help! *Madre de Dios!*" It went on and on in sheer terror, English mixed with Mexican.

Hatfield started instinctively down that long dim street away from the plaza. He was running, holding down on his gun handles, when a loop rose and tightened suddenly about his legs, locking the ankles together and tripping him into a heavy sliding fall. Jarred and disgusted, he clawed at his guns, knowing that he'd run into some kind of a trap, stepped right into the noose of a rope spread on the ground, waiting.

He struggled to rise, but the *cabestro*

A TALL TEXAS TALE

SMALL TALK

SAINT PETER awoke one morning to find a new recruit at his gate. Pete didn't know where the man was from, so he thought he'd impress him with some of the wonders and vastness of Heaven.

"You are now about to enter an unlimited territory," he said. Each abode is so far apart it would take years for you to visit a neighbor if it were not for the speed with which we can travel up here. Everything that grows is a thousand times bigger than anything on earth. Cows are a hundred feet high, and no herd contains less than a million head. Horses are even bigger, and they can run with the speed of light. Every woman is beautiful and has a perfect figure. Ours is unlike any other part of the universe. Why, if I was a betting man, I'd wager you've never seen—"

At this point the new man yawned and assumed the attitude of a person extremely bored.

"You don't seem to be impressed," remarked St. Peter, astonished at the man's indifference. "Say, just where are you from, anyway?"

The man yawned again, then lazily drawled, "Texas."

—*Al Spong*

yanked his feet from under him once more, spilling him with such stunning violence that the guns flew out of his hands. As he twisted and bent to tear at the taut hair rope a voice shouted:

"Comanche! Pablito! Get him quick. Beat him, but don't kill him. The barrel, Pablito! Don't cut him, Comanche!"

A gun-barrel crashed on the back of Hatfield's skull, and a boot smashed into his face. Dazed and blind with flashing lights, he rolled and reached out, catching a leg and jerking it in close, upsetting one man in the roiling dust and snow. He struck savagely at the broad brutal Indian-face, but the rope on his ankles dragged the Ranger away and stretched him full length. Pablito sank both knees in his captive's back, and clubbed at head and shoulders with the steel barrel.

Heaving with explosive power, Hatfield bucked Pablito off over his head, entangling him with the Indian who was striving to get up. Whirling and leaning far over, Hatfield clutched and tugged at the *reata,* vaguely aware of two more men at the end of the rope—Taddeo and Fasano, it looked like—dragging him along the snowy dirt in a sitting position.

Hatfield couldn't reel in enough slack to loosen the loop and free his legs. Taddeo came forward and slugged him full in the face, snapping his head and neck back, rocking him over backward.

Comanche and Pablito were coming from behind to work him over some more, when Fasano shouted:

"Someone comes! *Andale,* man! Come on, Tad! Run, Indian—run Pablito!"

Fasano and Taddeo were gone, with the bulky Comanche lumbering after them, but Pablito hadn't forgotten the humiliation of that gunwhipping on the trail. Hatfield saw that dark glitter of one of his Colts against the snow, and he lunged headlong for it with his right arm outflung in front of him.

Standing squat, hunched and froglike, Pablito reached for the gun he had holstered once, howling like a maniac, "Die, *Tejano,* die, son-of-a-dog!"

From behind Hatfield came the crunch of running boots.

But Jim Hatfield's sure hand had gripped his Colt, as he plunged along the snowy earth on his chest, and Pablito's barrel was just rising from the leather when flame lashed up at him with a loud bright roar. Driven backward by the solid impact, Pablito's gunhand swung high and he fired skyward.

On his knees now, the rope still dangling from his ankles, Hatfield let go another blast at the misshapen crumpling form. Pablito spun, reeled off at a leaning, twitching tangent, and pitched at last into dry-fronded rustling ferns at the foot of a blank adobe wall.

Then Ashley and Val Verde were there beside Hatfield, panting hard, with guns in hand. Jim Hatfield loosened and kicked off the loop and got up wearily, head and body sore and aching. He spat blood and dirt, smiled, and looked around for his other gun.

Val Verde spotted it first. Picking the Colt up, he wiped it off before handing it over. "Who was it, Jim?"

Hatfield told them, and added, "They figured on just beating me some, but Pablito had to stay and try for his revenge. That's him over by the wall. Sure glad you came along. They were getting pretty rough, and I couldn't do much with that rope on my legs."

"They could've killed you, Jim," Ashley murmured. "Thank God they didn't!"

"We should've killed them up in the hills when we had 'em cold," Val Verde declared. "It don't pay to let critters like that live."

"You're right, Val," agreed the Ranger. "We'll play for keeps hereafter."

CHAPTER V

South of the Border

THREE mornings later, Jim Hatfield was shaving in his room when Cobb knocked and entered, agitated and breathless.

"The herd's gone, Jim!" he panted. "Every Anvil critter cleaned out of the yard!"

Impossible, was Hatfield's first thought, as he went on razoring the strong clean lines of his jawbones. They don't steal whole herds out of town stockyards. But maybe they do in El Paso.

He asked, "What happened to the night watchmen?"

"Can't find a trace of 'em, Jim," said Cobb, rubbing his flat square face with a forlorn grimace. "The rustlers run the stock across the river. Ash wants to get after 'em, but I don't suppose you can cross with us, can you?"

"I'll cross with you, Cobb," said Hatfield. Putting down the razor, he washed his face clean of lather. "Can't follow the rules or let international boundaries stop you in this game."

He knew that Ashley had not yet sold his herd. The stockyard people had seemed to be stalling him, for some reason. And the Ranger also knew that while the yard was guarded around the clock, the owners disclaimed responsibility for cattle penned there.

This stockyard would bear investigation, Hatfield decided, but the first move had to be pursuit of the herd. A man named Jaeger managed the yard, but no one seemed to know anything about Huffnail and Millhauser, under whose names the business was operated. Something shady there. Jaeger might be tied up with the Cano crew.

"Where's Ash and the boys?" inquired Hatfield, toweling briskly.

"Down at the yard getting ready to ride, Jim."

"We'll be right there with 'em in a few minutes, Cobb." Hatfield finished dressing and buckled on his guns.

Coldwell's three Rangers hadn't returned from the field, as yet, and the Milt Travers' trio had not reached El Paso. Hatfield would have to take the trail with only Ashley and his four Anvil hands. It was fortunate that Arizona was ready to ride again. There'd be no assistance from Sheriff Kriewald and his deputies; they wouldn't cross the line. And no posse would go into Mexico either.

But six good men might be enough. The outlaws wouldn't expect to be followed south of the Border.

Mrs. Ashley and Donna were in the lobby, and Hatfield smiled and spoke to them reassuringly.

"Don't worry. We'll get the herd and bring it back in a few days. If three of my Rangers show up, you might tell them what happened and where we've gone."

"Just bring yourselves back safe and sound, that's all I ask," Amanda Ashley said calmly. "I'd rather let the cattle go than have any of you hurt down there in that awful country."

"It isn't so much different from Texas or New Mexico, ma'am. We'll be all right." Hatfield saluted them and went out with the stocky Cobb at his side, the two women watching them with anxious sorrowful eyes.

While Cobb helped get the horses ready and lay in provisions and extra shells, Hatfield ate a hurried breakfast in an adobe restaurant.

Listening to desultory remarks, the Ranger gathered that Lily Lavoy hadn't been seen since the night he had seen her in the Pueblo barroom. But that wasn't exactly an unusual occurrence, somebody remarked. Lily came and went in will-o'-the-wisp manner, on either side of the Rio Grande.

Still Hatfield was a bit worried about the woman. If there were any truth in her vague story, and the men involved knew of her conference with the Ranger, it might have been decided to eliminate Lily.

In the saddle a little later with the five Anvil men, Jim Hatfield followed the broad open trace of the herd out past winter-blighted cornfields and vineyards toward a river crossing wide of Juarez on the opposite bank. There was little snow left on the lowlands now, except in potholes and wooded areas, but the mountains were still white-capped and -flanked. Mallards winged up raucously from a marsh beside a stand of tamarisk. On the

river bluff salt cedars and brown cattails swayed brittily in the breeze. The cattle had left a wide gouged track down the embankment, and across the shallows Mexican soil was ground down and trampled in similar style. The rustlers hadn't bothered to obscure their trace.

THE search party forded the cold stream and climbed through crushed and matted reeds up a churned muddy claybank onto foreign terrain. After one look back at the vast mountain portal of El Paso, they pressed on southward into Old Mexico, across barren stony wastes studded with gray *granjeno* thickets and *sachahuiste* clusters.

There was a different feeling on this side, a vague sense of ancient evil and hatred and violence, that still existed. As many times as Jim Hatfield had invaded this country, he was still aware of that change in atmosphere once the river had been crossed. Mainly in a man's mind perhaps, but nonetheless deep and strong and irrefutable.

The herd was eight or nine hours ahead of them, hazed along by a score of riders, but toward noon they came to the place where a dozen or more horsemen had diverged from the drive and doubled back into the north toward Juarez. The big ones, no doubt—Taddeo, Fasano, Comanche, maybe Max Cano himself. But Hatfield and his comrades had to push on after the Anvil stock. That was all the Ashleys had left between them and utter poverty, absolute defeat.

"I see now why they left us the cattle," Ashley remarked ironically. "They wanted us to do the trail-driving, bring 'em right in handy to the Rio Grande for Cano's bunch. Well, we did—and they're gone."

"We'll get 'em back, Ash," said Hatfield. "There's only about eight Mexicans left with the herd, and they're so overconfident they didn't even cover their back-trail."

"Damn right we'll get 'em," Mullen said, a homely grin splitting his red face. "It takes more than measly rivers and boundary lines to stop the Anvil."

And Cobb nodded darkly. "You said it, Mul."

Sandhills rolled monotonously about them, patched with mesquite and *agrito*, and canyons gashed the bleak, rocky landscape. Creeks and water-holes were marked by willows and green *jarillo*. The Sierra Madre, mother mountains of Mexico, stood carved in dark grandeur on the western horizon.

The afternoon was warm for this season, warm enough to sweat the horses and permit the men to remove their heavy winter jackets. Hatfield was impatient, knowing how quickly Goldy could have outdistanced the other mounts, but he was in good company and knew it. He needed these men, as they needed him.

Arizona was gay, happy to be on the move, with the prospect of a fight before them. Val Verde laughed often at the merry quips of his friend.

The signs of the herd freshened in front of them. By sundown or early evening, they'd overtake the rustlers and the cattle. And hoped they would not encounter any other bands whose eyes were on that herd. For there were still Apaches and Comanches in this country, but not as powerful and menacing as in the past, although they still launched occasional bloody raids on both sides of the Border.

Hatfield wondered what had happened to Coldwell's three Rangers. He hardly expected to see them alive again—or even dead. In a few years, a dozen Rangers had vanished in this territory, having been lured into Mexico and murdered by Max Cano's band, without a doubt.

Most outlaws tried to avoid killing Rangers, but Cano apparently scorned any such caution. And when men disappeared like that, there was no evidence of foul play or even of death. Small wonder that Rube Coldwell had despaired. It was like warring against shadows, ghost enemies flitting immune before your guns.

The sun, winter-pallid, dipped toward the ramparts of Sierra Madre, and shadows lengthened blue and purple on the scoured broken surface of the earth. The

spoor of the drive grew fresher, until the dust cloud of the herd was visible in the fading light.

JIM HATFIELD led the men out in a wide arc then, and brought them back to jagged rimrock overlooking the box canyon in which the herd was to be held overnight.

There were eight vaqueros with the cattle, as Hatfield had estimated, but Chico was the only one he recognized. The rustlers were setting up camp in the walnut trees beside a small creek near the mouth of the canyon. Tangles of thorny *nopal* grew from the broken rock walls, and tall branching pillars of *pitahaya* were scattered along the bottom.

Hatfield tried to formulate a plan of attack. Even against these Mexican killers he hated to strike without warning. Perhaps the best way would be to start the herd moving from the closed end of the canyon, on the west. Four men behind the cattle, driving them out, with two others at the mouth to turn them north. Hit the outlaws on the run, as the herd was stampeded through the narrow valley.

While Hatfield discussed the matter with his companions on the rim, two Mexicans rode westward to nighthawk the cattle. The other six settled down around the orange glow of the campfire.

"Your idea's all right, Jim," conceded Val Verde. "But we could just as well come in the open end and wipe 'em all out. Make sure of them Mexes, then take the stock."

"You're real blood-thirsty, Val." Arizona grinned. "But it's more fun to give 'em a fighting chance and take 'em on the wing."

"That's right, Arizona," agreed Mullen. "I ain't got much heart for killing 'em in their blankets."

Val Verde shrugged and spat. "Any way's all right with me, boys. Just remind me to grab one of them Saltillo blankets on our way out."

"Always wanted a Saltillo myself," Mullen said.

Cobb squirted tobacco juice down the slope. "Be nice, if you could get the Mex stink out of 'em."

Hatfield turned to Ashley. "Ash, you and Cobb better take the mouth and turn the herd north. The rest of us'll drop around to the box-end and get them started."

Ashley smiled reproachfully. "You trying to give us the easy part, Jim?"

"It won't be easy out there, Ash," said Hatfield. "It's never easy to turn a stampede, and you may have some Mexicans to handle, too. On second thought, I'm going to split up even and give you Val Verde. You'll need three men at the mouth, and three of us are enough to punch the stock along."

Winter darkness closed in abruptly, and they withdrew from the rimrock and dropped down the outer grade to eat a cold supper and wait for moonrise, once more wearing their heavy jackets against the night chill. When the moon came up they parted, Ashley turning eastward with Cobb and Val Verde, while Hatfield jogged to the west with Arizona and Mullen.

Hatfield's detail mounted the rise at the dead-end of the canyon, and from the hump they saw the herd spread out below in the moonlight. Fifteen hundred head of prime beef, about forty thousand dollars on the hoof at the current prices, a good-sized fortune in this day and age on the frontier. It represented a lifetime of hard work for Ashley, the difference between comfortable success and total failure.

They picked their way warily down the inner slope, switching back and forth through *cardenche* and scrub oak, with Hatfield leading the way on his sure-footed sorrel. The rolling of pebbles and the crackling of dry brush was covered by the sounds made by the cattle, shifting and lowing as they grazed.

The Mex night-riders were on the far side of the herd. Hatfield took the whip of stiff branches and warmed his right-hand gun in his palm, easing the iron in

the cold leather. Hoofs sparked on stones and skidded in leaf-mold, and saddle gear creaked complainingly. Here and there were dirty drifts of snow.

LEVELED off at the bottom, they prodded the cows into motion, slowly at first, then increasing the pressure until they heard the profane Latin cries of the bandits as they tried to check the stirring herd. At Hatfield's signal, Arizona and Mullen joined him in lashing and driving the steers onward.

Soon the whole great mass was rolling at a steady run toward the open end of the canyon. The night-herders fought to hold the animals, but force from behind kept the bunch moving, snorting and bawling.

When the two Mexicans fired into the air, to alert their *compadres* in camp as well to try and stem the tide of beef, Jim Hatfield and his partners began shooting in the background. The herd surged forward with a rumble that made the frosty earth shudder, panic spreading like wildfire—and the stampede was on!

The outlaw pair fled in front of the thundering torrent of cattle, while Hatfield and Arizona and Mullen raced their horses through the smoking dust in the rear.

It had all the wild exhultation of a cavalry charge, and Hatfield laughed aloud as he heard his comrades howling like blood-mad Indian braves. The Mexicans had been pulling out to the left, the last time Hatfield glimpsed them, and he swerved to that side with Mullen in his wake.

The nighthawks, clear of that avalanche of horned heads and drumming hoofs, turned at the wall to peer back and see what had spooked the steers. Their guns blazed as they spotted the oncoming riders. Hatfield and Mullen threw down and fired from the gallop, with lead searing past them.

Hatfield saw the man he'd targeted reel and topple from saddle into shale and boulders, the pony bolting alongside the mill-race of the herd. Mullen's target, horse and all, went down in a threshing tangle in the *tazcal* bushes. In passing at full stride, the Ranger slammed another shot into the dark, huddled form in the rocks, and hurtled on down the edge of the canyon.

A horse screamed behind him, and Hatfield reined Goldy in and around in a tight rearing turn. Mullen's grulla, gutted by a knife stroke from the fallen Mexican, was foundering fast, with Mullen jumping clear and rolling along the ground. The slate bronc was down, kicking and trumpeting in anguish, and gunfire slashed after Mullen before he ceased tumbling on the turf. Jim Hatfield opened up at the muzzle flashes, and watched his slugs jolt the kneeling Mexican back and down in the *tazcal*, but too late for Mullen, he feared.

He swung down and turned Mullen over, lifting him carefully into his arms. Mullen tried to grin, but death was in his face.

"Thought I had him," Mullen panted painfully. "Played possum, Jim—up with a knife—in my horse's belly. Tell Cobb and the boys—" A spasm shook him, blood drowned the words, and Mullen was dead.

Hatfield rose, sorrow and anger mixed in him, and ejected the empties and refilled the cylinder of his right-hand Colt. Stepping into leather, he put the sorrel into a run after the stampeding stock. If Mullen got the Saltillo he'd always wanted, it would be for a shroud.

The other six bandits, routed from their bedrolls or fireside squatting, made a brief stand in the walnut trees, then fled wildly before the rampaging herd. At the mouth of the canyon, rifle fire from Ashley and Cobb and Val Verde ripped out of the shadows and scythed down galloping horses and screeching riders.

Two mounted men and one riderless horse ran the gauntlet and escaped into outer darkness. All the others died under that wicked scourging rifle fire.

The lead steers had slowed somewhat, in the face of all those blasting guns, and the stampede lost sufficient momentum so it wasn't too difficult for the three Anvil

men to turn the herd northward. Hatfield and Arizona came up out of the dust-storming ruck, and the Ranger reported the loss of Mullen. The men from Anvil, Cobb in particular, took it hard and bitterly.

KNOWING the cattle would soon run themselves out now, they went back for Mullen's body, pausing at the creek-side camp for Cobb and Val Verde to pick up the best of the abandoned Saltillo blankets. Arizona caught one of the Mexican ponies that came straying back into the canyon, and they wrapped Mullen in a blanket and tied him across the saddle.

Then they went on after the herd. They drifted it north through silvery moonbeams and black-etched shadows, toward the Rio Grande and the pass and the homeland of Texas.

In the chill gray of morning, they saw buzzards flapping over a small draw and went to investigate. Under a clump of frail pepper trees, they found what the Mexicans and vultures had left of Coldwell's missing trio of Rangers, identified by the silver encircled-star badges, which the killers had taken from American wallets and pinned to the belts. A gesture of defiant bravado, the ultimate insult to the *Tejanos.*

Gagging with revulsion and rage, Jim Hatfield removed the Ranger badges and turned away from the putrefying stench.

"Cano!" he said, through his teeth, and it was like a curse in one word.

CHAPTER VI

River of Death

MILT TRAVERS, with Red Bouchard and Fox Edley on the Texas side of the Rio Grande had been stalking a Mexican pack train on the opposite shore, up the river and waiting for the Mexicans to attempt a crossing. But instead of trying to ford the river, the smugglers stayed on native soil and headed into Juarez. The three Rangers rode on into El Paso del Norte.

Bone-tired from their long, dull wilderness trek, dirty, unshaven and trail-worn, the Rangers racked their horses in front of the first decent-looking cantina they came to, and went in to ease their thirst and hunger. Settling down around an out-of-the-way table, they ordered a bottle of whisky, an olla of water, and three glasses.

Anxious as they were to meet Jim Hatfield, inner needs were of greater importance at the moment. And anyway, they concluded, the Lone Wolf probably was working outside of town.

Milt Travers, the youngest, though the veteran insofar as Ranger service went, was tall and blond, with a bronze stubble masking his boyish face. Red Bouchard had the brightest of blue eyes above a ragged, fiery beard. His body was stocky, compact, and luxuriously relaxed on the stool. Fox Edley, sharp features blurred by trail dust and whiskers, was lean and tough as rawhide. His bowlegs were stretched out and his wiry figure at ease.

"Jim'll probably have Cano and his crew buried by this time," Red Bouchard said, savoring the biting warmth of the liquor.

"Afraid not, Red," drawled Milt Travers. "Cano's a real big operator."

"Well, I hope Jim left something for us to work on," Fox Edley said. "I'm sick of riding herd on a piddling dried-up river and a bunch of gutless smugglers that don't dare to cross it."

"Don't worry, Fox." Travers smiled. "This Cano crew will take some cleaning up. Rube Coldwell, the captain here in El Paso is a good man, but he hasn't been able to do much with Max Cano."

After a few rounds of drinks, they ordered and ate heartily of steak, tortillas, chili and frijole beans, washed down with coffee and more whisky. At the nearest table, a thin dapper Mexican and a bulky drunken American were talking loudly, the drunk buying the drinks and boasting about various enterprises.

"You have more dinero than the bank, Señor Pelkey," said the Mexican admiringly.

"Plenty more coming too," declared the man called Pelkey, wagging his shaggy head. "All a man needs on this Border is the right connections, and I've got 'em. Inside and outside of the law both. Me and Max—"

"No names, please!" The Mex raised his palm, and glanced about the noisy, smoke-filled interior. "They say thees new Ranger ees veree tough."

Pelkey bellowed with laughter. "He'll go the same way Coldwell went. There ain't enough Rangers in Texas to buck the outfit we got. El Paso law won't touch us, and the Rangers can't. We got too many big moguls behind us, Torquado. We're as safe as a babe in its mother's arms."

In the corner the Rangers were listening, without seeming to, thinking they might have chanced upon a good lead in that drunken braggart. When the waiter came around, Travers asked him quietly:

"What happened to Captain Coldwell here? Do you know?"

"*Si*, señor, he ees dead. He keeled heemself about two weeks ago."

The Mexican, Torquado, was saying, "You should get some sleep, Señor Pelkey. You are full of the juice, man!"

"I ain't drunk." Pelkey knuckled his low, receding forehead, and scrubbed his jutting bristled jaws. "I drunk enough to kill six men, and I'm stone sober. Want to tell you about the woman."

"You told me once," Torquado said, grimacing. "That of the woman turns my stomach."

"It was orders," Pelkey said thickly. "I obey orders, and get well paid. She talked too much, Torquado—to the wrong people." He made a wringing motion with his large grimy fists held close together. "Like a chicken, amigo, the neck of a chicken."

Torquado gestured and stood up suddenly. "I go now. Take my advice and go to bed." He moved away to the bar.

PELKEY laughed and drained his glass, upended the bottle and found it dry. A few minutes later he rose heavily and blundered out the door.

Milt Travers glanced at the bar and saw that Torquado had gone, too, apparently out the back way. Travers smiled at his companions.

"Let's see that Señor Pelkey gets home safe, boys."

They went outside and followed Pelkey's erratic weaving path along the adobe-lined street. Guitar music floated on the night air, splintered by the barking of dogs and the crying of children. A cold wind swept down from the pass, blowing snow and dirt against 'dobe walls and brush ramadas. A small plaza opened before them, with a fountain and water trough in the shadow of an old towered mission. There were few people on the street, and the Rangers closed up in back of the unsteady Pelkey.

They were only fifteen feet behind the man when gunshots roared from the dark mouth of a nearby alley on the right. They heard the bullets strike Pelkey, saw them push him sideward and down into the gutter.

Three muzzle flashes and three solid hits. Pelkey was dead or dying before he hit the ditch, and the snipers were running away as the Rangers threw their guns clear and advanced on the alley.

"Come on—they must be Cano's!" Travers said, firing between the buildings to keep the men ahead moving, Bouchard and Edley sending shots after his.

The sounds of continued flight through back yards came on the breeze as the Rangers plunged into the passage and emerged in rear area blackness. If the bushwhackers had horses near there would be no chance of catching them now. Evidently, though, they had no mounts staked out waiting for them. They were legging it in the direction of the river. The Rangers took after them with guns in hand.

The last houses were left behind, and the chase went on across vineyards and cornfields toward the Rio Grande and the

lights of Juarez which were a yellowish smudge on the other side. The moon cleared a cloud bank and flooded the earth with pale eerie light. The running Mexicans fired back as they fled, and the Americans hammered shots after them. One of the running figures could well be the slim, dapper Torquado they had seen and heard in the cantina.

In the cottonwoods and willows on the river bluff, the Mexicans made a short stand, but were soon breaking and running again as the Rangers kept driving onward. The long-legged Travers drew ahead of his shorter companions through the bare trees and onto the bank. The shallow sluggish stream was partly iced over at this point, and the Mexicans were crossing on the thin shell ice, breaking through into shallow water now and then.

Taking careful aim at the slight form in the rear, Milt Travers dropped his man on the ice, certain now it was Torquado. Bouchard and Edley came up, panting and blowing, and unleashed their Colts at the other two men. Torquado twisted around as he lay prone and began firing, his shots kicking dirt as Travers's feet and clipping branches overhead. Milt steadied his barrel and blasted away. Torquado jerked and twitched as the slugs went home, until finally he was stretched motionless.

One of the other Mexicans was down, but the third one was dragging him through broken ice and water into the dark shadows of the opposite shoreline. Travers slid down the embankment and waded through reeds to the river. He was going out to get Torquado when the stricken Mex crawled feebly to a breach in the ice and vanished into the black water.

Ice cracked and broke away beneath Travers's boots, and he scrambled back toward solid ground. A ragged segment of ice drifted out from the bank. To the sudden horror of the Rangers they saw the drowned body of a woman in a tattered gown, the moonlight glimmering on blonde hair that had been caught in the cat-tails that grew along the shore.

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Milt Travers hauled the soaked, swollen corpse from the water, and saw the grotesque angle of the head and neck, the bruises on the white throat which was already turning color.

"Must be the woman Pelkey strangled—like a chicken," Travers said, as his comrades came down alongside him. "Quite a beauty once, I reckon. It's too bad."

RED BOUCHARD splashed tobacco juice into the stream. "She talked too much—and so did Señor Pelkey. Both to the wrong people."

"This El Paso's a real nice town," drawled Fox Edley.

They carried the woman's body back to their horses in the Mexican quarter, and rode to the center of the community with her slung across Travers's black gelding. At the jailhouse, Sheriff Kriewald identified her as the notorious Lily Lavoy, a Border belle of the lowest repute.

"Who would want to kill her, Sheriff?" inquired Travers.

Kriewald snorted. "Any one of the hundreds of men she has been with, I suppose. Whoever it was that did it, it's good riddance. What's your business here anyway? How did you happen to be down at the river?"

Milt Travers had meant to disclose their identity, and to ask for Hatfield, but something changed his mind. Something about this sour, skeletal sheriff. He said, "Just riding around when we came across her body in the river.

Kriewald didn't like that answer, but instinct warned him not to cross these men. He dismissed them with a fretful, impatient gesture. And the three men walked out into the night.

They found a barber shop open late, and took it over to indulge in baths, shaves and haircuts. The barber informed them that Hatfield was out of town on the trail of a stolen herd, accompanied by a New Mexico rancher named Ashley and his cowhands. Mrs. Ashley and her daughter were staying at the Pueblo Hotel, meanwhile.

In the lobby, freshly barbered and fragrant with bay rum—Bouchard's red beard had been trimmed to a neatness comparable to the clean shaves of the other two—they encountered Mrs. Ashley and Donna, made themselves known, and learned further details of the situation here.

"We better ride across and meet them," Milt Travers said easily. "They might be able to use a few extra hands in getting the herd back to this side and they'll need us if trouble comes."

At the livery stable they swapped their jaded mounts for fresh horses, selecting them with care, switched saddles, and rode out again in the night toward the Rio Grande and Mexico.

"No rest for the wicked," Red Bouchard sighed.

"Nor even for the righteous like Milt and me," said Fox Edley, grinning, as they picked up the widely trampled trace of the Anvil herd.

CHAPTER VII

Battle on the Bluff

WHEN the great mountain portal of El Paso came into hazy view of the five weary men on the northward trail drive with a tired, sullen herd the afternoon was waning. They had been fortunate so far. No Mexicans had come to jump them.

But they wouldn't be safe until they had crossed the river. Chico was one of the two outlaws who had escaped from that canyon, and he'd certainly rejoin the main force and report the loss of the cattle. Jim Hatfield had been expecting an attack all day long.

Ashley was on the point, with Cobb and Arizona riding swing, and Hatfield and Val Verde pushing the drag. The cattle had traveled too far, and they wouldn't drift along without constant hazing and chousing.

In spite of neckerchiefs over nose and mouth, Hatfield and Val were choking with the dry, gritty winter dust kicked up by the herd. The Ranger usually enjoyed working stock, when he got the opportunity, but he was too worried to relish this drive today.

They had to maintain ceaseless vigilance while prodding the animals on. If Cano's crew did come, they would be in far superior numbers. The Anvil would have but little chance of fighting them off and also holding the herd.

Clouds covered the pale, remote sun, and in the late afternoon, snow began to fall, laying the dust somewhat, but also lessening visibility to a dangerous degree. They had swung wide to avoid Juarez and the bandits, but the cattle would be easy enough to spot once the outlaws were alerted and on the hunt.

Hatfield lifted his scarf to spit and speak to Val Verde. "Can't figure what's keeping them, Val, unless they're all drunk in Juarez."

"Let's hope they're full of mescal, Jim," said Val. "And that it's rank poison. Although I'd rather give 'em lead-poisoning myself."

Ashley had the pony bearing Mullen's body with him at the point, since he had less maneuvering to do than the swing and drag riders. With a point composed of veteran lead steers, and the herd in motion, about all Ash had to do was pick his course and stay ahead of the bunch. On the swing, cows were always straying, and in the drag laggards were forever falling behind. It kept the drovers sweating.

The trees along the Rio Grande were in sight now, dim and blurred through slanting curtains of snow, and the pace accelerated as the cattle began to catch the scent of water. It looked as if they were going to make it; something was keeping the Cano band off their backs.

Thin-stalked candlewood swayed in the wind, and *agrito* berries made scarlet patches against the snowy bunch grass and wilted gray *granjeno*. The pass was obscured now by the storm, and the marginal growth of the river was seen but intermittently in the blowing snowfall. As the point neared the bluffs, Hatfield rode forward to help Ashley choose a crossing place.

Racing his sorrel on ahead, the Ranger scouted the river and found a shallow ford with open shelving banks on either side of the stream that was rimmed with crumbling shell ice and dotted with floating fragments. He called and signaled back, and Ashley turned his point with practiced skill and assurance, stringing it out along the bluff.

"Take 'em across, Ash!" yelled Jim Hatfield. "I'll hang back and help the boys feed 'em into the water."

Ashley, leading the Mex pony with Mullen's body on it, and the lead steers were splashing out into the ice-flecked shallows when gunfire racketed out in the background.

"Keep 'em going, Ash!" shouted Hatfield, and wheeled Goldy off into swift full stride for the rear. The Cano clan must have struck, just as they reached the Rio Grande!

The cattle kept moving, spooked by the shots, lunging and bawling as they poured after the leaders, sliding down the embankment and wallowing through broken ice and cold water. Hatfield vaguely saw Arizona's mounted form before him in the dust and snow, gun flashing as he galloped back to help Val Verde behind the drag. On the other flank Cobb was cutting to the rear, firing as he rode.

GOLDY stretched out to overhaul Arizona's bronc. Hatfield brought his gun into action when he saw the blurred, fleeting shapes of horsemen driving in at the tail-end of the herd. Val Verde's horse was down, and Val was flattened out behind the dead bulk working his carbine.

Caught in a crossfire from Cobb on one wing and Arizona and Hatfield on the other, with Val blasting away down the middle, the Mexicans were thrown into pitching brawling confusion. Ponies and men were thrashing to earth under the American guns. Hoarse cries soared.

The outlaws dropped back, leaving their fallen scattered on the white ground. Reforming into a broad skirmish line, they charged again through the wind-lashed snow. Too late to stop the herd this side of the line, but they had enough riders to overrun and annihilate the Anvil rearguard. They came in, screaming like Comanches on the warpath.

Jim Hatfield, Arizona and Cobb made their stand alongside Val Verde and his dead mount, shooting from the saddle. Mexican ponies went down, rolling and kicking, and riderless horses veered off into panicked flight. But the attack came on with reckless fury. Gun flames stabbed to and fro in the snowstorm.

But there were too many bandits. Hatfield knew it was suicidal to try and hold the line.

"Come on, Val—grab a stirrup!" he yelled, reining Goldy in close to the cowboy on the ground. "Back to the river, boys!"

Val ceased firing reluctantly.

With Val Verde clinging to Hatfield's stirrup, and Cobb and Arizona covering them, they broke for the wooded bluff of the Rio Grande, with the enemy in pursuit. Ashley came racking out to meet them, and his added fire checked the rustlers for a moment and allowed the Anvil group to gain precious yardage in the flight.

But the Mexicans were closing in for the kill at the edge of the salt cedars and cottonwoods, when sudden scorching fire from the rear flanks raked the outlaw ranks and emptied Mex saddles. Gunsmoke billowed on the breeze.

Milt Travers and Red Bouchard and Fox Edley had been following the trail drive for some time, figuring that they could offer more protection from outside than in with the herd. The snow had covered the enemy approach, however, and the bandits had hit the drag before the Rangers could intercept them. But now, striking from the rear wings with devastating three-pronged gunfire, they slashed apart and scattered the Mexican assault force, their muzzle lights streaking the murk.

In the trees on the river bluff, Hatfield and his comrades flung themselves from the leather and turned their rifles loose on the enemy. Trapped between that cross-whip of firing from front and back, the outlaws fled into the gusty snowstorm, riding double in some cases and dragging a few of their wounded and dead.

A half-dozen men and more horses were left behind, hunched and crumpled dark forms on the white terrain. Chico was one of these, the only one Hatfield knew.

Travers and his comrades rode in, and Hatfield greeted them with grateful warmth before introducing them to the Anvil men.

As they forded the river in the darkening gloom, they brought one another up to date on the preceding events of mutual interest. Hatfield was saddened to hear of Lily Lavoy's murder.

"She tried to help me, and they had her killed," he said. "And what you boys overheard in the cantina ties in with some of the things Lily told me. We're on the track of something bigger—and rottener—than I realized, at first."

On Texas soil once more, they regathered the herd and headed in toward the early-blooming lights of El Paso, at the foot of its guardian mountain. In the snowy dusk, whipped by winds from the pass, they crossed dry *acequias* and skirted fields of yellow corn stubble, and vineyards with the cut vines molded into conical mounds of loam for winter protection.

ASHLEY, tall and solemn in his saddle, said, "It's sure good to be back on this side. I wish Mullen could've made it with us. And Jim, I'll never be able to thank or repay you and your friends anywhere near enough."

"There's nothing to repay, Ash," Jim Hatfield said gently. "Now if you can't close an immediate sale with Jaeger at the stockyard, we'll have to keep our own watch of the cattle. I've got to find out who really owns that business. Whoever it is could be hooked up with Cano."

In the stockyard office, Jaeger offered Ashley a flat twenty thousand dollars for the herd, approximately half its actual value, declaring that beef prices were down, the market slow and overloaded, and that the cattle had run off all their fat and tallow. Ashley shook his head and looked at Hatfield beside him.

"That offer's ridiculous," the Ranger said, green eyes clouding cold gray as he stared at the manager. "Who do you work for anyway, Jaeger? Huffnail and Millhauser, you say? Well, where are they?"

"They're absentee owners," Jaeger said, beginning to lose some of his brassy cocksureness. "They live in Chicago."

"I'll be in to inspect your books, one of these days," Hatfield said. "Meanwhile the Anvil stock stays here until you make a reasonable offer." Jaeger started to say something, but Hatfield cut him off with a slicing motion of his big hand, and went on, "If that herd is stolen again, Jaeger,

you'll answer for it. To me and the Texas Rangers. Remember that, mister!"

"We've got some law of our own in El Paso, Ranger," protested Jaeger, trying to bluster it out.

"You have?" Hatfield said, with quiet scorn. "Doesn't work too well, does it? But you're going to have some law here, Jaeger. A lot more than men like you want. If you can be called men!"

"Do you mean to insinuate—"

Hatfield leaned over the desk, and

"The trouble, suh, is that I'm from Texas and ashamed of it!"

Jaeger shriveled under his gray-steel glare. "Do you care to resent anything I have said?"

Jaeger swallowed hard, shook his narrowed, pomaded head, and waved feebly at the door. Hatfield laughed softly, took Ashley's arm, and turned away.

After they had gone, Jaeger slumped spinelessly into his chair and lowered his vixen-face into his pale quivering hands. . . .

That night Jim Hatfield had a late supper and a quiet pleasant reunion with his three Ranger comrades in a private dining room. Earlier, Mayor Essling and Leo Fribance and Milo Bascom had called on Hatfield at the Pueblo Hotel, to congratulate him on recovering the Anvil herd, and to offer their services in aiding him to clean up El Paso and this Border sector.

The men were personable and had a certain charm, but something about them didn't ring quite true. The other Rangers had observed this meeting from a discreet distance.

"What did you boys think of our three eminent citizens?" Hatfield asked as they began their supper.

"About as much as I thought of your Sheriff Kriewald," said Milt Travers, with his boyish smile.

"They gimme the same feeling a rattler or a Gila monster does," Red Bouchard declared, caressing his fiery beard. "Civilized Apaches in nice store clothes, a scalping knife up each sleeve."

"My notions are the same," admitted Fox Edley. "White Mexicans is what they put me in mind of most. Dripping oil all over you, while they wait for a chance to

stab you in the back."

Jim Hatfield nodded gravely. "Big game, boys. I've got an idea that may bring them out in the open. In the meantime, I'd like to find out which one of them is the top ladies' man."

"That dude Fribance gets my vote," Bouchard said.

Milt Travers grinned. "The subject reminds me that Max Cano is supposed to be a great lady-killer—as well as just a killer."

JIM HATFIELD listened, sober and thoughtful. If there was another man in Sue Coldwell's life, it might be one or the other of these men they were discussing. He might be doing Sue a grievous injustice, but he couldn't afford to overlook a single angle. Lily Lavoy hadn't risked—and lost—her life to talk to him, simply for spite.

He was inclined to believe now that Sue did have a lover, and that prominent men were secretly allied with Max Cano. To smoke them out, he'd have to risk his own life, but it should be worth it.

"Well," he finally said musingly, "we've cut Cano's crew down considerably, at any rate. Pablito and Pelkey and Torquado here in El Paso. Six men in that canyon, and at least twelve more on the other side of the river. Even an army like Cano's can't stand losses like that for any length of time. But we've got a long way to go yet, boys. The worst ones are still alive—and so are the big ones in back of them."

Red Bouchard smiled at him through his whiskers. "It won't take long, Jim. Now that you've got Milt and the Fox and Red Bush here with you."

CHAPTER VIII

Point Counter Point

NEXT day the weather cleared, and the sun shone bright and warm, melting the snow and mellowing the air. The eaves and awnings and ramadas of El Paso dripped cheerfully in the sunshine. Muddy water gushed in the *acequias,* puddled the streets, and flowed in the gutters. Slow brilliant drops fell from naked peach trees and poplars, cottonwoods, cedars and chinaberry trees.

Afternoon sunlight flooded the mayor's office, raying through blue cigar smoke and turning the whisky golden in the bottle and glasses. Essling beamed from behind his desk, bald head and cheeks red and jolly.

Flanking the desk in luxurious leather chairs were Milo Bascom, the lawyer, and Leo Fribance, the copper executive, poised and polished young men with an air of sophisticated ease and latent power about them. Jim Hatfield, pacing the floor slowly, was in marked contrast with his strong, bronzed features, his big rangy figure clad in rough range clothes, and with two low-sheathed guns on his thighs.

Milo Bascom was speaking suavely. "There are any number of men on this Border who might have murdered Lily Lavoy, Hatfield. The strangling, the broken neck, indicates a crime of passion."

Hatfield shook his dark head, with a somber smile. "I happen to know that a man was hired to kill her. A man named Pelkey, who was shot to death in turn, because he got drunk and bragged about murdering Lily Lavoy."

"Possible," conceded Bascom. "But what does it prove?"

"Nothing much, I guess." The Ranger assumed a sheepish expression, and ruffled his crisp black hair.

"Exactly." Bascom sipped his drink, and went on: "As for the three Rangers, they invited death when they crossed onto foreign soil. You know that as well as we do. They were out of bounds, overstepping their authority." Bascom dismissed the three dead Rangers with a light gesture. "Now have you learned anything else, Hatfield? Anything at all significant?" Both his tone and manner were patronizing.

Hatfield was secretly pleased. These elegant superior characters thought he was

rather simple, good with guns but short on brains.

"A question for you," Hatfield countered. "Have you heard any scandal about Sue Coldwell?"

Bascom masked his surprise, and answered glibly, "Not a breath of it, man! The lady is a paragon of virtue."

"Thought so myself," mumbled Hatfield. "But I've heard things that made me wonder a little."

He had scored slightly, he realized, even though these men were adept at covering up. Mayor Essling and Leo Fribance were a trifle uncomfortable, and Bascom had been startled a bit.

"A man in your position has to discount malicious gossip," Essling reminded.

Fribance added, "All women as lovely as Sue Coldwell are talked about, you know."

"Sure, sure." Hatfield scuffed the carpet and acted embarrassed.

"Have you discovered anything worthwhile?" Bascom asked, with impatience. "We want to help you, Hatfield, but we must have something concrete to work on. Rumors and vague theories are no good to us."

Hatfield smiled and inclined his head, shy and awkward. "Well, I've learned quite a lot here, in a short while." It was time to throw something at them, he decided. Rock them and shake them. "I know Jaeger at the stockyard is crooked, and acting for somebody even crookeder. I'll get to them in time. I have a hunch that Rube Coldwell was murdered—doped, and then shot with his own gun. Maybe by the man his wife fell in love with. And I know that there are some big, influential and respectable men mixed up with Max Cano in this very dirty business."

Hatfield exhaled cigar smoke and scanned the trio through the dense bluish haze. That had struck home all right. Essling lost his jovial look for an instant, and Fribance's refined face became drawn and taut. Milo Bascom momentarily mislaid his eloquence and groped around for words to say.

THEIR recovery was remarkably rapid, however. In a matter of seconds they were talking and laughing easily again, puffing on cigars, and sampling liquor with evident enjoyment.

Hatfield sauntered to an open window above the plaza, apparently unaware that he had said anything out of the ordinary. Travers and Edley and Bouchard were down there somewhere, waiting to cover him when he emerged from the building after this interview.

"A good day to be alive on," Hatfield remarked inconsequentially, hoping that the three men behind were beginning to want him dead and out of the way. If his scheme panned out right, there'd be an early attempt made on his life when this conference was over. And that would be practically an admission of guilt on the part of these three civic leaders.

"I don't trust your sheriff much either," Hatfield drawled, wanting to make it good and strong while he was at it, and knowing that Kriewald was their man, an accomplice in anything in which they might be involved.

"You're crazy, man!" Bascom said, with exasperation, and Hatfield had to repress a laugh of satisfaction.

"Maybe so," he said, with a guileless grin and a wag of his head. "Maybe I been shot at too much. Maybe I've killed too many of the men who shot at me. *Quien sabe?*" He shrugged his wide shoulders and spread his large powerful hands. "But I always play hunches. And I'm seldom wrong."

Mayor Essling regarded him with faint alarm. "You're too used to settling everything with a gun, Ranger."

Hatfield laughed, making it purposely wild and reckless. "Is there any surer or more final way, Mayor?"

"I must warn you to go easy, Hatfield," Bascom said sternly. "That badge doesn't license you for wholesale indiscriminate killing. We are not unknown in Austin. You'd do well to bear that in mind, my friend."

"Don't worry," the Lone Wolf said carelessly. "I never killed an innocent man

yet, and I've been at this quite a spell."

Fribance stared at him with cool contempt. "Did it ever occur to you that a bullet would kill you as dead as the next man, mister?"

Hatfield smiled. "That's a pretty well-known fact, Fribance, but it's never worried me a whole lot. Always figured I'd die —when my number came up. Don't you believe in fate, Fribance?"

"To a certain extent. But a man—an intelligent man—can do a great deal toward shaping his own destiny."

"It's easier to be a fatalist," drawled Jim Hatfield.

Essling set down his empty glass and thumped the desk with a pudgy palm. "This gets us nowhere, gentlemen. We have some business to attend to, Hatfield, if you don't mind."

"On my way already," the Ranger said blithely. "Thank you for the drink and smoke, and the conversation." He put on his hat and went out with a slight exaggerated swagger, feeling their eyes on his back.

Hatfield thought he had accomplished what he wished to there. Ten to one they were already plotting his execution. Perhaps a hand signal from a window above the plaza would put an assassin on his tail. But he wasn't unduly troubled, with Milt and Red Bush and the Fox out there.

In the balmy open air Hatfield had a sudden queasy sensation in his stomach, realizing how exposed and vulnerable he was. No matter how alert, sharp, and quick his associates were, they couldn't stop a sniper's bullet from striking him down. They'd get the killer, but too late to do the Lone Wolf any good. Perhaps he'd baited those men too far today.

He wandered about the open square, expecting the shock of a slug at any instant. Casually and unobtrusively, his comrades moved with him but apart, Travers and Bouchard on either side and Edley in the rear, covering his every step.

But nothing happened. No shots came, no expert knife-user tried to slip the steel to him. Maybe he'd been wrong about that trio in the mayor's office. Instinctive dislike could have shaded his judgment.

REACTION shown by them might have been that of any solid esteemed citizen toward a man who lived by the gun. In the civilization that was coming to the West, slow but sure, men like Jim Hatfield would have no place. Maybe Bascom, Essling and Fribance were ahead of their time.

By prearranged plan, Hatfield finally left the main plaza to skirt the Mexican section on his way to the stockyard, the other Rangers keeping aloof but in pace with him. Except for the Ashley party, nobody in El Paso knew them as Rangers, and no one had seen them in public with Hatfield.

Jaeger, the stockyard superintendent, was a weakling, and Hatfield's next move was to make him talk, sweat some truth out of him. But on reaching the yard he found the office locked and empty. Ashley and his cowboys were guarding the Anvil herd, and they said Jaeger hadn't been around all day.

"Reckon you threw too much fear into the weasel," Ashley said, smiling soberly at the big Ranger.

For a lazy interval Hatfield sat on the corral rail smoking and chatting with the Anvil men, while Bouchard and Edley and Travers lounged in the background. If Jaeger had run out, Hatfield thought, perhaps he had better put the pressure on Sheriff Kriewald and see what he could squeeze out there. He had believed he had scared the mayor's faction into making some overt and revealing play, but it looked as if he'd been wasting his breath. Either those three were innocent, or they didn't consider him dangerous. Or they were waiting a bit before ordering his death.

In the brief lavender twilight, Jim Hatfield left the stockyard smells and sounds to stroll deeper into the Mexican quarter, still escorted by his three friends. The atmosphere was entirely different here, foreign and Old World, dark and mysterious, with that sense of underlying evil and hate which was so tangible south of the Border.

Night closed in over the squalid huddled adobes as Hatfield entered the little plaza in which Pelkey had died. The fountain was tinkling musically before the bell-towered mission. A man, broad, husky and Indian-faced, stepped out of the shadows at Hatfield's back, and a knife glinted dully in his hand. He was about to deliver the fatal thrust when gunshots blasted from three different points behind him.

Hatfield whirled and saw the ugly, frozen-mud face of Comanche, his bulk drawn high and rigid in the split-second before collapse, the blade slithering free of his nerveless fingers. Catching the Indian before he could fall, Hatfield hauled him into the dark tunnel of an alley, the other Rangers filing in after them. Bouchard guarded the mouth, and Edley slid past to cover the back end.

There was no commotion in the plaza. These people did not swarm out every time they heard gunfire in the street.

Hatfield propped the dying Comanche against the adobe wall, and crouched beside him with Milt Travers. "Who sent you to kill me, Comanche? Who do you work for?"

The Indian gazed blankly at them in the dim light. "Me dying. Me no talk."

Hatfield motioned to Travers. "Scalp him, Milt." Travers drew his knife and grasped a handful of greasy black hair, laying the keen edge against the breed's forehead. Comanche struggled weakly, rolling his head from side to side.

"Me work—Max Cano. You know that."

"What about Essling, Bascom, Fribance?"

"Don't know. Me plenty sick."

"Where's Cano now?"

"Don't know."

Hatfield said: "Lift his hair, Milt."

The Indian groaned protestingly, squirming as the blade touched his brow. "No scalp! Me tell!" He tried to point his hand. "Adobe—behind church—his house. Him not there. Maybe Taddeo, maybe Fasano." Comanche shuddered, stiffened, and went slack and inert.

Hatfield and Travers stood up, and Milt said, "What you think, Jim?"

"Worth a try anyway."

"Suppose the mayor's outfit ordered this?"

"Maybe through Cano's gang," Hatfield said. "Hard to tell, Milt. But we'll make somebody talk sooner or later. Maybe tonight—if the adobe behind the mission is Cano's hideout."

As they started across the plaza, shooting broke out from the direction of the stockyard, the crash of guns rising, rolling and echoing.

"Get back there, boys, and side the Anvil!" Hatfield said. "I'll take a look behind the church." When the others hesitated, Hatfield went on with a new edge in his tone: "That's an order, men. Get going!"

They left, reluctant, but running hard. Jim Hatfield crossed the dark plaza alone, toward the severe facade of the mission.

CHAPTER IX

Into the Pit

HATFIELD, alone in the spectral stillness at the adobe wall of the church, felt all the weird mystic qualities of Old Mexico press in upon him with the darkness. A strange people, defeated on this side of the Border, yet indomitable. Proud and humble, noble and base, brave and cowardly, romantic and practical, generous and selfish, kind and cruel. A paradoxical race.

But there was no question about the viciousness and guilt of Taddeo and Fasano and Max Cano, regardless of who controlled them from higher up.

The adobe directly in back of the mission was unlighted and somewhat isolated from its neighbors, with a lean-to wooden shed and an adobe-walled corral in which several horses stirred restlessly. Lamplight gilded the windows of surrounding huts, but this one was dark and vacant-looking.

Here off the plaza were the customary sounds of dogs yapping, children shout-

ing, and undertones of guitar and mandolin music. There was the spicy tang of chili, frijoles, and Mexican cooking in general. The shooting at the stockyard had ceased.

Hatfield left the rear wall of the church and stalked onward in the delicate filigreed shadows of lacy pepper and chinaberry trees. Reaching the corral he moved along it. The house remained dark and silent. But as he stepped from the end of the corral, he saw a man standing idly at the corner of the adobe. It was the wiry dapper Fasano, the silver conchas gleaming palely on his short braided jacket, his white teeth flashing under his thin mustache.

"You must want to die, gringo," he remarked casually. "It is time you did."

"I want to talk to you," Hatfield said, standing tall and easy.

Fasano laughed, and the tiny silver bells on his pointed sombrero chimed faintly. "What have we to talk about? Let the guns speak for us, *Tejano*. I am not so slow and foolish as poor Pablito. Draw, Ranger, before someone comes and deprives me of the privilege of killing you!"

Fasano's hand flicked to his ornamented holster. Jim Hatfield's reaction was instant and automatic, the big Colt rising with fluid speed and jumping as fire burst from it on a level line. Fasano's pistol blared on a downward slant, and dirt sprayed Hatfield's booted legs. Bent in the middle, swaying on splayed feet, Fasano tried to straighten and lift his gunhand.

Hatfield brought his barrel down from the recoil, and flame jetted again with a deep roar. Smashed back onto the 'dobe cornice, Fasano sagged and slid to earth in a seated posture, legs sticking out in front of him. With a grunting gasp he drew up his knees, rolled sideward from the corner, jerked out straight, then was still on the shadowy ground.

The wind from the pass carried the echoes away through bare branches and off wattled roofs. Hatfield strode forward, gun poised.

"Quien es?" a voice asked from around the corner, at the front of the house. "Fasano! What you shooting at, man?"

Then a door slammed shut and a bolt snicked into place, as the speaker withdrew to the interior. Hatfield thought that sounded like Taddeo, and I want Taddeo. Alive and talking.

A dark window glimmered near that corner. Jim tried to raise it but could not. With a sweep of his gun-barrel he smashed the glass and pulled back against the wall to the left of the sill. Gun flame belched from deeper inside the house, reddish lightning illuminating a corridor beyond this corner room, and adobe dust and glass fragments spouted past the Ranger's ear.

Leaning to the right, Hatfield fired swiftly through the shattered window. A quick return screeched off the frame inches above his head. Lining on the muzzle light, he lashed another shot into the interior, and through the beating concussions heard a lurching, tumbling noise.

Taddeo was down, but not necessarily dead! If alive, he was holding his fire, waiting in there.

HATFIELD looked around the yard and along the street. The horses were bucking in the corral, but nobody was coming. A blessing on these people for minding their own business.

Hatfield used his gun-barrel to rake the lower part of the window frame clear of jagged shards. He swapped guns, taking the fully loaded one in his right hand, and lunged headlong in over the low sill, twisting and flinging himself aside on the earthen floor, as soon as he struck.

A shot blazed through the open doorway, low, and ripping the dirt floor where Hatfield had landed. He held low and fired back, on his feet and moving the moment he triggered. There was a threshing, whimpering sound in the adjacent hallway. The Ranger thought Taddeo was hit again, and trying to crawl away from that open threshold.

He hurled a chair into the corridor, and the Mexican wasted two slugs on it. Hatfield threw down at the flashes, and heard the man flounder convulsively, groan, and then lie quiet, except for his ragged

breathing.

"All right—come in," Taddeo moaned. "I'm finished, man."

"Throw your guns out," Hatfield ordered.

One after another the weapons thudded near his feet as he stood beside the doorway. He tossed another chair through, but this one fell unheeded. He stepped into the corridor and saw Taddeo sprawled like a torn broken bundle of clothing.

"Quien es?" the Mexican asked, in a hoarse panted whisper.

Gun ready, Hatfield crouched and scratched a match with his left hand.

"Now you talk sense. Inquire of Mayor Essling—and his fine friends. Use your guns—against the *patrons*. We poor Mexicans—get all the blame."

"Essling, Bascom, Fribance—and Kriewald?" Hatfield murmured.

Taddeo moved his head up and down. "Ask them—about the stockyard. The herd of the—Anvil. Suicide of Coldwell—Lily Lavoy and—all the rest."

"And Max Cano?"

"Is a big man—but still takes orders," Taddeo said, slow and faint. "Veree talented with the gun. Your luck, *Tejano*—will have to be much."

A TALL TEXAS TALE

THE BIG POSTHOLE DEAL

PAUL BUNYAN, being a mighty big man, even got down into Texas, it seems, and oil field workers delight in telling of Paul's big posthole deal.

Paul struck a dry hole while drilling for oil at Breckenridge. Raging mad, he smashed the derrick with one blow of his fist. Then a day or two later he noticed the advertisement of a rancher in the Panhandle who wanted 10,000 postholes dug. So Paul hitched a chain to the dry hole he'd drilled and pulled it out.

Realizing that the hole was much too long to be shipped as it was, he cut it into short lengths, shipped the pieces to the Panhandle and sold it for a fancy profit to the rancher who needed postholes.

—Gene Olson

Taddeo sighed. "Is you. I expected it. *Tejano,* you kill more—than the great plague. With more luck than—the devil himself."

"You want to talk now?"

"I always talk. Born with—the tongue of silver. But tired—now."

"Who killed Captain Coldwell?" asked Hatfield.

Taddeo smiled wanly. "Not me. Ask his wife, señor."

"Who is she in love with?"

"Again not me—unfortunately. Ask her—caballero."

"Who owns the stockyard here?" The Ranger lit another match.

Taddeo's grin was bloody, mocking.

"He is a great lover, too?" persisted Hatfield.

Taddeo grimaced. "Much man—with the women. Ask Señora Coldwell."

Hatfield straightened up. "I'll send a doctor. If I get out of here alive myself."

"No need," whispered Taddeo. "I know death. Have seen—too much of it. Leave me, amigo. I die better—alone."

"Adios," Hatfield said softly.

This gallant rascal might yet live to go to prison, if he received medical attention in time. The Ranger reloaded both Colts, unlocked the front door and went out, carrying his right-hand gun.

A group of Mexicans had gathered about the flashily dressed body of Fasano,

village peons rather than bandits, wearing no weapons and having no fighting-cock arrogance.

Hatfield said, "I am a Texas Ranger. These men are outlaws."

"Ees true, señor," said a gnarled old man. "Eef you keel them all, maybe we can sleep nights in thees place."

"The one in the house is still alive. Bring a doctor to him, and he may not die."

"Ees better dead, señor. But we weel do as you weesh."

"*Gracias*, señores," Hatfield said.

SALUTING, he strode off toward the central plaza and the American section. He wondered where Cano and the rest of his crew were. If they had attacked the Ashley group at the stockyard, why hadn't Fasano and Taddeo been with them?

All was quiet in that direction now. His Rangers probably had helped the Anvil beat off the assault.

Jim Hatfield resolved to go straight to the Coldwell home on the northern edge of El Paso, and shock the true story out of Sue Coldwell. He had almost enough now, but he wanted all he could get, wanted to be absolutely positive before he finally struck.

Armed with the full truth, he could go after the arch-criminals at the head of this outlaw organization, the brains behind the guns of Max Cano and his desperadoes. The men who were responsible for so many Ranger deaths, even though they hadn't fired a gun themselves.

CHAPTER X

Iron Trap

BEFORE the three Rangers, Bouchard and Edley and Milt Travers, could get to the stockyard, the firing had stopped. When they arrived on the run, winded and gasping, the area was silent and serene, save for the bawling of cattle. The Anvil men were gone, the place deserted except for a handful of attendants and loafers.

"What happened here?" asked Travers, removing the sweated hat from his blond head.

"Sheriff Kriewald come out with a posse and arrested Ashley and his cowhands," a man told him.

"Anybody hurt?"

"Naw. There wasn't any fight. Some of the posse was liquored up and shooting off their guns into the air. They was too many for the Anvil to buck."

"What was the trumped-up charge against Ashley?" demanded Travers.

"Rustling and smuggling beef, I reckon." The stockyard man grinned under his drooping mustache. "Ashley's own beef, of course. That's the law for you, in this town. I got more respect for Cano's bandits."

"Jaeger with the posse?"

"Jaeger ain't been seen today. Out of town on business, they tell us. Probably drunk in some cellar honkytonk over in Juarez."

Red Bouchard spat a hissing stream of tobacco juice from his bearded mouth. "Let's get to the jailhouse before they hang them Anvil men for running their own cattle."

Milt Travers looked at the attendant. "If anybody tries to move that Anvil herd, send word to us uptown."

"Who are you boys, anyway?"

"Texas Rangers," Travers told him, and turned away with his partners.

As they tramped toward the main plaza, Fox Edley said, "Somebody sure wants that Anvil stock real bad—and for free. That skull-headed sheriff's going to be sorry he made these false arrests."

"Lot of folks in this town going to be sorry before long," Red Bouchard growled. "And if we're going to tear around like this all the time, we ought to get our horses out. This walking's awful tiresome."

Edley chuckled. "You ain't tripped up on your beard yet, pappy. What you cry-

ing about?"

Bouchard snorted. "Listen to the human skeleton. There ain't enough flesh on your bony carcass for whiskers to grow out of."

In the plaza, the posse seemed to have dispersed to various saloons, but Sheriff Kriewald and his deputies were in the jailhouse office, and Ashley and his riders were locked into cells at the rear of the squat adobe. Across the way lights glowed in the tall windows of the mayor's second-floor office.

A deputy tried to check the Rangers at the entrance, but Milt Travers shouldered him aside and went directly to the desk behind which the emaciated, gray Kriewald sat with a mouthful of snuff. Bouchard and Edley flanked Milt, a trifle to the rear, eyes roving the room and hands hanging near gun butts.

"What do you want?" the sheriff asked.

"Ashley and his boys," Travers said. "You can't make those arrests stick, and you know it."

Kriewald smiled expansively. "Well now, just who the hell do you think you are, sonny?"

"I'm a Ranger. We're all Rangers. And you've just made a sad mistake, Sheriff."

Kriewald stiffened nervously, hiding his uncertainty behind a loud blustering voice. "How do I know you're Rangers? Hatfield didn't tell me anything about you."

Travers produced his silver star-in-circle badge. "What does that look like?"

Kriewald sniffed. "The way they been killing Rangers across the line, almost anybody could be carrying one of them stars." He signalled to one of his deputies, and the man slipped out the door at once. "Anyhow, son, the Rangers aren't running this office."

"They're going to be damn soon," Milt Travers drawled. "This office and this town, and this part of the Border. Your string's running out."

"Get out of here!" rasped Kriewald, veins protruding in his bulging forehead.

TRAVERS shook his head. "We're taking the Anvil men. Turn them loose, Kriewald, or we'll take 'em from you."

"They're staying right where they are!"

"Until Cano has time to run off their herd again?"

Kriewald came erect, tense and quivering. "Why, damn your eyes!" He glanced at his deputies, but Bouchard and Edley were already looking at them, and the deputies were freezing, shrinking, ignoring the sheriff and eying the floor with extreme discomfort. "By the Almighty!" panted Kriewald hoarsely. "Go get that posse out again, Crump! I got such a yellow-dog bunch of deputies I have to raise a posse every time I want something done!"

Crump departed with haste.

"The posse isn't going to help you this time," Milt Travers told him. "We've got *you*, Sheriff. If they start anything, you're the first one that gets hurt—maybe killed."

Kriewald was suffering intensely by this time. A shiny film of sweat was on his haggard, sunken face, and terror was in his slitted eyes and writhing, lipless mouth. An interlude of silence followed, the sheriff and his two remaining deputies anguished and distraught, the three Rangers completely at ease.

Finally Travers turned to the deputy who held a big ring of keys. "Get back there, open up and let them out."

The man looked beseechingly at Kriewald, who was slumped dismally back in his chair.

With a quick easy flip Travers threw his right-hand Colt clear and held it on the deputy. "Get moving!" The man shuffled back toward the cell block, with Travers lounging gracefully after him.

Kriewald pawed at a desk drawer with trembling fingers, but sank back and dropped his hands in his lap as Fox Edley drew and covered him. "Keep 'em in sight," Fox warned. "We don't want to burn you down yet." Kriewald obediently placed his narrow clenched hands on the desk-top.

Bouchard laughed through his red beard. "You want to be careful, Kriewald. The Fox here's always hated sheriffs, all

his life. Nothing he likes better than shooting a sheriff. Used to be an outlaw, see? And even now that he's a Ranger, he can't get over hating sheriffs."

Milt Travers returned with Ashley, Arizona, Cobb and Val Verde, carrying the key ring and the deputy's gunbelt.

"Left your man in a cell, Sheriff," drawled Milt. "He was too nervous and upset to come back out here."

The Anvil men selected their gunbelts from the wall pegs, and strapped them on.

A great trampling of hooves and a rising tide of sound came from the plaza, and the deputy by the front window gasped and swore.

"What the hell's coming? Looks like an army—the Mexican Army! Why, I'll be damned if it ain't Max Cano's bunch, and they got the jail surrounded!"

"And Sheriff Kriewald sent for them, didn't you, Sheriff?" said Milt Travers, with gentle irony. "But even they aren't big enough to get you out of this one, Kriewald. Unless you go to the door and tell them to ride out of here."

"They won't listen to me, you fool!" cried the sheriff. "They'll slaughter us all!" He scarcely noticed when Travers took his gun.

"Get the mayor to call them off then, Kriewald."

"Nobody can call 'em off. They came to kill you!"

"Well, you'll die with us," Travers assured. "In much better company than you deserve— Get those lamps, boys."

He blew out the one in the nearest wall-bracket, and the others were immediately extinguished, leaving the adobe jailhouse in darkness.

"There's *Cano!*" cried the deputy, in awed tones. "Max Cano himself!"

Fox Edley laughed. "He's taking an awful chance. Liable to get himself killed here."

"We're the ones that'll get killed here, you damned idiots!" moaned Kriewald. "We're in a trap! We haven't got a chance!"

"Come out, gringos!" shouted a Mexican in the plaza. "One at a time, hands up in the air. Come out if you want to live!"

"Come in after us!" bellowed Red Bouchard.

"We are many. You are few. It will be a massacre!"

"That's what you like, ain't it?" Red yelled back. "Come on, Cano, lets have another Alamo here!"

MILT TRAVERS said coolly, "Get away from the windows and keep down, boys. Too many big windows in this place. They can really rake us—if they cut loose."

"We're as good as dead right now," Kriewald whined hopelessly.

"Tell Cano you're in here, Sheriff," said Travers. "He won't fire on an old friend and business associate."

"He has no friends," Kriewald mumbled. "He'd like to kill every American in the country. And then start on the Mexicans."

Arizona's gay young laughter rose in the room. "He's even more blood-thirsty than my friend Val."

"Any drinking liquor in here, Sheriff, break it out," Val Verde said. "Going to jail always gives me a wicked thirst."

"All crazy, groaned Kriewald. "Don't know enough to be scared. And here we are caught like rats in a trap, without a single solitary chance in the world!"

"Send the sheriff out, and you all go free," came the call from outside the walls.

"Come in and get him," Cobb yelled. "You are many, we are few."

Mescal-primed laughter roared in the plaza. "We can kill him, too. One more *Tejano* don't make much difference. Prepare to die, gringo dogs!"

CHAPTER XI

The Truth at Last

ON HIS lonely walk to the northern outskirts, many thoughts flickered through the mind of Jim Hatfield. He was

almost reluctant to learn the truth about Sue Coldwell, even though it was essential in order to uncover the men at the top of the lawless ring.

He had a good idea of what he was going to find; all it needed was substantiating. But he knew that was going to be odious, and revolting. A wife and mother like Sue Coldwell, who had been married to a fine man like Rube! It shook his faith in humanity in general, and women in particular.

Hatfield wanted to help the Ashleys keep their stock and get set up on a new ranch somewhere. There was a family to renew and rebuild the faith which women like Sue, and men like Essling and his confederates, undermined and destroyed.

If they were as guilty as the Ranger believed. He should give them the benefit of the doubt, but it was hard to be that lenient. He had always hated hypocrisy. Esteemed leading citizens turned outlaws were the worst hypocrites of all.

The Coldwell house was unlighted and deserted-looking behind the leafless poplars. Hatfield rapped on the front door. There was no response. He tried the door, but it was locked.

Apprehension chilled him to the marrow. They might have sent Sue away—or killed her—to keep her from confessing the facts. But what about the children? Hatfield shivered deep inside, and then a murderous rage mounted within him.

Recalling the side entrance to the office, he went around the house to that door. It opened readily under his hand. He moved into inner darkness, sensing another presence before Sue Coldwell spoke:

"Hello, Jim. I thought you'd come. Perhaps that's what kept me alive." Her voice was flat, hollow, lifeless.

"Are you sick, Sue?"

"I'm dying, Jim. And it's a good thing, all around."

"Where are the kids?" he asked, spine a column of ice and scalp prickling.

"Upstairs asleep. See that they're taken care of, Jim." Her voice was hushed, breathless. "Light a lamp now. You can't make me any more ashamed than I am."

Hatfield lit the desk lamp and turned toward her wonderingly. Sue was lying on the rawhide lounge, both hands clasped to her body. Blood seeped through her fingers and spread darkly on her gingham dress. Her black hair was wildly dishevelled, the gray eyes enormous in her gaunt, drained face, the lips colorless and dry with fever.

"What happened, Sue?" Hatfield crossed to her side. "Let me look at that."

"No, it's no use, Jim," she whispered. "I can't live. I don't want to live."

Hatfield bowed his head. "You didn't—"

"No, I didn't stab myself. Any more than Rube shot himself." Her laugh was low, retching, and intensely bitter.

"You want to tell me, Sue?"

"The least I can do, Jim. So you can get them, smash them, end the evil I helped perpetuate."

"Who did this, Sue?"

Her pale lips framed the name, "Max Cano."

"But why?"

"Jealous." Her smile was ghastly. "They told him I was deceiving him. With you, I guess. They wanted me dead, Jim. So I couldn't talk."

"Who are they?"

"Bascom—Essling—Fribance. They're behind it all, Jim."

"I thought so," Hatfield said. "But I wanted to be sure— Who killed Rube, Sue?"

"Max Cano—with my help." Her tone was utterly dead. "You had it right that first night, Jim. I drugged him. And Cano shot him."

JIM HATFIELD stared at her aghast, his head turning slowly from one side to another, gray-green eyes and strong-boned features mirroring his horror.

The woman said, "I will say only this much for myself—I didn't know he meant to kill Rube. He told me he just wanted him out of the way while he went through Rube's files here, to find out if the Rangers had anything on him in writing. I was horrified when Max killed him, but then it was too late. Go ahead—hate me, Jim.

You can't hate me half as much as I hate myself."

"It's not hate, Sue. I—I just feel—sorry for you."

"It was something I couldn't help, Jim," said Sue Coldwell. "Something I had no control over. And I mean this as no excuse, for certainly there is none. It—it just happened. I fell in love. Really in love, for the first time. Didn't even know who he was in the beginning. When I found out—it didn't matter. I—I would have done anything for him, Jim. Anything—short of murder. No woman ever fell lower."

Hatfield looked at her, and thought of Lily Lavoy, and a great sickness filled him. "So it came to this, tonight."

Sue nodded dully. "Max thought I was dead. But I had to live—to see you and tell you, Jim. Now I don't mind dying. It's the only way out—for me. Just see that the children are all right, please, Jim."

"They'll be taken care of all right," he promised. "Where did Cano go from here?"

"Back into town. Kriewald's going to arrest Ashley and his men. Cano's crew will surround the jail and kill them. You'd better hurry, Jim."

Hatfield put his hat back on. "I'll send a doctor, Sue. And someone for the children."

"Never mind the doctor, Jim," she protested faintly. "Just somebody for the kids. Good-by, Jim. Good luck and God bless you."

"They own the stockyard, don't they?"

The tousled dark head inclined. "They own everything, Jim. Give me that pad and pencil. I'll write it all out—while I've got the strength."

Hatfield handed her the paper and pencil. "So long, Sue." He went out and turned back toward the center of El Paso, stretching his long legs into a steady driving run along the dim street.

When he reached the plaza it was swarming with Mexican horsemen, the jailhouse entirely ringed in by them, and Hatfield realized that his three Rangers must be penned in there with the four Anvil men. And he knew there was only one way to save them.

Hatfield entered the large adobe opposite the jail, and climbed the stairs three at a time. The door to the mayor's office was unlocked. The Ranger threw it open and strode inside, kicking the door shut in back of him.

Essling and Bascom and Fribance whirled from the front windows, where they had been watching the show in the central plaza. Hatfield walked toward them, grim-jawed and towering in the lamplight, greenish eyes going stormy gray and big hands swinging easily.

Mayor Essling attempted his false politician's smile, but it was a sorry failure. Milo Bascom read the Ranger's face and reached under his tailored coat for the shoulder-slung pistol there, but Jim Hatfield drew and struck like lightning with the barrel, beating Bascom face down on the floor. Leo Fribance was dodging aside, yanking a stubby belly-gun from his waistband when Hatfield swiveled and shot him through the right arm, ripping the pistol loose and clattering into the corner.

Bascom rolled on the carpet, blood trickling into his eyes, and clawed his gun out. Jim Hatfield wheeled back and kicked the weapon clear across the room. Bascom grappled at his knees, and the Ranger raised one leg and drove the high-heeled boot squarely into the lawyer's face. Bascom fell back with a strangled sobbing groan, and writhed on his shoulder-blades, with both hands clutching his mutilated bleeding features.

HATFIELD waved his Colt at Essling. "Call off your Mexican dogs down there, Mayor. Chase them out of town, or I'll gut-shoot the three of you right here!"

Essling floundered around and leaned from the window, raising a hoarse frenzied cry into the night:

"Get away from the jail, Cano! Pull back and move out. This is Essling. Ride out, I say, and ride out fast!"

Curious faces were upturned to that window, and the bandits milled about uncertainly.

"What's the matter, Mayor?" a voice floated up. "Somebody got a gun in your back?"

"Two of them!" bawled Essling. "Get out of town, you fools!"

Commands were barked out below in Mexican, and the outlaws gradually withdrew from the jailhouse and began filing out of the plaza. Soon they were gone into the night.

Hatfield smiled as a Rebel yell went up from the squat adobe across the square. He prodded Bascom with his toe.

"On your feet, shyster. We're taking a short walk now."

Milo Bascom got up, moaning, hands still covering his face and blood streaming through his fingers and down his wrists.

"One on either side of him and let's go," ordered Hatfield.

Leo Fribance, right arm dangling broken and useless, fingertips dripping red, caught Bascom with his left hand and turned a shocked white face on the Ranger.

"What do you think you're doing here, you maniac?" he demanded.

"I'm arresting the three leaders of the Max Cano bunch," Hatfield said mildly. "Get along before I give you two a taste of the barrel."

He marched them downstairs, across the plaza, and into the jailhouse, where Milt Travers promptly locked them into separate cells, and then threw Sheriff Kriewald and his assistant in with the other deputy.

Jim Hatfield told his comrades what had transpired in the Mexican quarter, and out at the Coldwell home, reserving some of the more sordid details out of respect for the dead Rube Coldwell.

"I want someone to take a doctor—and a nurse, if possible—out to the Coldwell house," he said. "And we'll need a doc here some time for Fribance's arm and Bascom's face. But no hurry on that. The rest of you boys guard this jail. We've got some important prisoners in there."

"Where you going, Jim?" asked Red Bouchard, munching his tobacco.

"I've got one more hunch to play out, Red," said Hatfield, with a thin smile. "If I'm right it ought to wind this up."

"Seems like you could use some help once in awhile," Bouchard grumbled. "There's quite a few of them Mexes, even for the Lone Wolf."

"But I figure only one of them will come back this evening," Jim Hatfield said softly. "And I've got a lot of good reasons for wanting this one myself, boys."

CHAPTER XII

Man to Man

CANO might come back, thought Jim Hatfield. Max would soon know that Fasano was dead, Taddeo dead or dying, and that Bascom, Essling and Fribance were behind bars. Cano would try to sal-

[*Turn page*]

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vage whatever money was left in the mayor's office, then cross the Rio Grande to the sanctuary of Old Mexio.

The game was over, the band broken, the big ones dead or in jail—all but Cano. Safe across the Border he could live like a king, reorganize his outlaws whenever he wanted to, and be alone on top this time, the commander-in-chief.

Max Cano, who had murdered Captain Rube Coldwell and now Sue Coldwell, and many other Rangers and Americans, altogether too many. As well as ruining other unfortunate women like Sue.

More than anything else at the moment, Hatfield wanted to find and shoot that mad-dog Mexican.

It was like an obsession, a madness in his brain and blood. He had to kill Max Cano! If it meant dying himself, he had to get Cano! And he would. He could feel it, strong and sure. Even if he should be shot through the heart himself, Jim Hatfield would live long enough to kill that evil Mexican bandit!

The moon soared free of the clouds as he stepped into the plaza, a pure disk of silver in the frosty star-dazzled blue night sky. The heights of Franklin and the other mountains reared in snowy splendor above the pass. Shadows patterned the square, and a breeze blew sand and wastepaper against the benches and bandstand and horse trough. Chinaberry branches rose and fell with the wind, and sounds of revelry drifted from saloons and cantinas.

The lighted windows of Essling's office glowed less brightly now, Hatfield realized with a start. Someone was there, or had been there. Cano had lost no time in coming back to plunder headquarters—if it was Cano. And it must be, it had to be.

Hatfield crossed the plaza, feeling the push and tug of the wind, and spitting grit from his dry mouth, in which the taste of powdersmoke lingered rankly.

He climbed the stairs with watchful eyes and ready hands, the weight of the sheathed guns familiar and comforting on his thighs. A door slammed shut above, and boots clomped toward the rear of the building. The Ranger bounded to the top of the stairway and saw a trim medium-sized Mexican nearing the back of the dim corridor, a satchel in his left hand, spurs softly clinking on the fancy boots.

Pacing forward, Hatfield called, "Cano!" and the Mexican spun smoothly about, left hand and the bag resting on the newel post at the head of the back staircase, right arm relaxed at his side. He was calm, insolent, full lips smiling under his prominent arched nose, eyes that were unusually large for a man. Not handsome, but full of ego and assurance, his attractiveness was of the bold variety.

"The great Hatfield?" His voice was pleasant, liquid, with a slight accent.

The Ranger had halted, standing big and loose and easy.

"And the great Cano," he drawled. "Face to face, at last."

"Why get yourself killed, Ranger? You've got nothing on me."

"I've got everything on you, bandit."

Cano laughed musically. "What do you mean by that, *Tejano?*"

"Mrs. Coldwell didn't die, Cano," said Hatfield. "At least not right away. She lived to write and sign a confession and statement that convicts all of your rabble—especially you."

"Ah, then you must die here, Hatfield." The outlaw chieftain sounded regretful. "Another Ranger for Maximilian Cano."

"Get on with the killing then."

The hallway was long and poorly lighted, wall-bracketed lamps turned low and flickering, and if Hatfield missed the first one, Cano would drop out of sight down those stairs.

CANO'S hand moved, as fast as any Hatfield had ever seen, and his gun came up flaming a fractional second ahead of the Ranger's. Hatfield felt the hot passage of the bullet, and saw his own strike wood from the railing beside the Mexican's valise. The reports blended into one thunderous roar, deafening in the confined space. Then Cano was gone, skipping lightly downstairs, and Hatfield was racing ahead in the smoky corridor.

The rear staircase spiraled around an open well. A shot leaped up, splitting the handrail as Hatfield reached the top and slashed his fire down at the fading muzzle light. Cano was circling near the bottom when Hatfield started down.

The stairwell was bright with flashes as they blasted back and forth, up and down, the air full of flying splinters, chalky mortar dust, and gunsmoke. Cano's shots came so close that Hatfield felt the lead whip and pluck at his clothing, and he was barely missing his flitting target below, unable to get a slug home.

The outside door crashed open, and Hatfield took the last eight steps in a hurtling leap, landing catlike and lunging out the open doorway onto a loading platform at the back of the building. Gunfire roared up at him from the ground, ripping a loose board against his ankle.

Hatfield tripped and fell headfirst as another bullet burned over his back and shattered a store window behind him. Jarred breathless, he rolled over slackly and toppled from the platform edge to the dark damp earth of the back yard.

Max Cano was running for his pony, jumping into saddle and throwing a shot back when Hatfield came up in a crouch, feeling the slug sear his left cheek. He fired until his right-hand gun clicked empty. Cano's coyote dun reared high and pawed the air with a horrible scream, falling over backward and flinging the rider off into the shadows.

Hatfield drew his left-hand Colt and transferred it to his right hand, searching for his man in the murky blackness. Max Cano was up almost instantly, gun ablaze and bucking in his grasp. Jim Hatfield shifted and lined on those muzzle flares, hammering away as fast as he could work the action, the gun torching and leaping in his firm hand.

And Cano was hit at last, good and solid, smashed backward and down, twisting and snarling, on a rubbish-strewn ash pile, with tin cans ajangle beneath his thrashing body.

Hatfield waited, holding his fire, and the sounds lessened until Max Cano was silent and motionless, dead in the back yard rubble. The Ranger made sure of him, picked up the small bulging satchel, and walked around through an alley and out into the plaza. Legs numb, arms heavy, head still ringing with those gun-blasts.

His Rangers and his Anvil friends were coming on the run, delighted at seeing him alive and unhurt, crowding around with eager questions and gruff, anxious words. It was good to be in their midst, no longer alone and facing death, but now that it was ended Hatfield felt old and tired, empty, and vaguely ill.

"Yes, it was Cano," he said slowly. "He's out back there—with his horse. It's all over now— How's Mrs. Coldwell?"

"She died, Jim," said Milt Travers. "I've got her statement. It's more than enough to get life for our prisoners, or maybe the rope."

"Whatever they get'll be too damned good for 'em," Red Bouchard declared, bearded jaws moving on his chew.

"The Coldwell kids are with Amanda and Donna, Jim," Ashley said somberly.

"Couldn't be in better hands, Ash," said Hatfield.

FOX EDLEY glanced up at him. "Seems Sue Coldwell had title to a ranch outside of here a ways. She signed

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it over to you, Jim. So you can retire and go in the cattle business any time now. Me and Red know you been wanting to get out of the Rangers for some spell." He winked slyly at the others, a grin on his sharp face.

"You'd be surprised if I did just that, wouldn't you, Fox?"

"Not me," chirped Edley. "Some folks might, but not me and Red Bush."

"Well, I'm not going to anyway, needless to say," Jim Hatfield said, with a grave smile. "But if I've really got a ranch, I know what I'm going to do with it."

"You got it all right, Jim," Milt Travers assured him. "She left everything to the kids and you, with you as their guardian."

"Sure, Jim." Bouchard laughed. "You got a family without having to go through the unholy tortures of matrimony. You always was luckier than a cross-eyed hunchback."

Jim Hatfield grinned and turned to Ashley. "That herd of yours has got a new home, Ash." The rancher tried to protest, but the Ranger wouldn't listen to him. "That's the way I want it, Ash, and that's the way it's going to be. We can arrange the details later."

Ashley swallowed painfully and blinked his eyes, trying to squeeze back the tears. "Reckon Amanda wouldn't mind bringing up another family, Jim, if you want the kids to grow up on a ranch. We always liked kids, although we only had one—that lived to grow up."

Jim Hatfield put his arm around lanky Ashley's shoulders. "I don't know of a better place for those kids, Ash, than on a ranch—with you folks."

"Cobb and Val and me'll make hands out o' 'em," Arizona promised.

Ashley couldn't say anything with that lump choking his throat. He just held onto Jim Hatfield with one hand, lifting the other to his smarting eyes. He was glad when Val Verde shoved a bottle into his hand, and Cobb pulled the cork for him. A good long drink of that firewater was enough to bring tears into any man's eyes.

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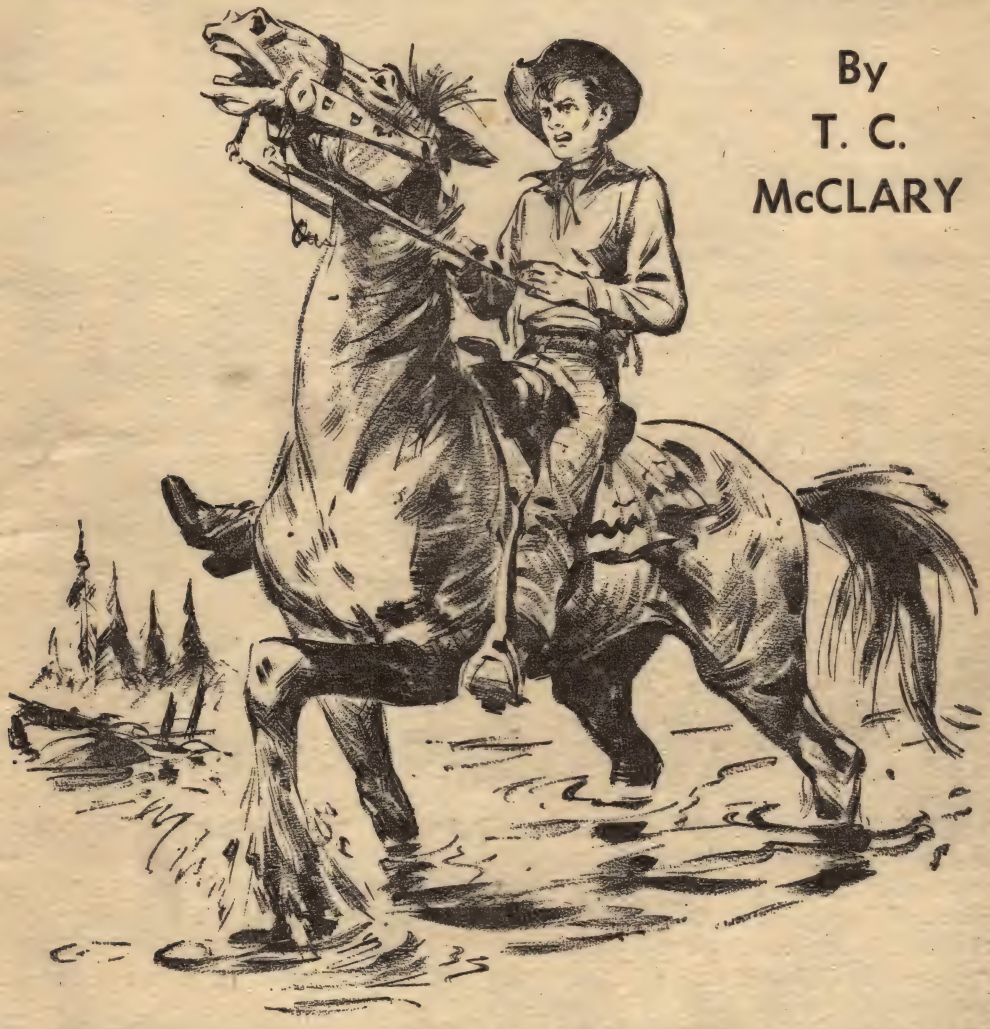
LUCKY DOLLAR

By T. C. McCLARY



The nester kid idolized outlaws. He didn't know they came in all colors, and mostly yellow, but he found out the hard way!

THE kid drew rein on the brow of the long rust-and-yellow slope, studying the white-nosed herd from a screen of brush, and planning out just how he'd do this. It would be his first rustle, but in his mind, he could hear the way the boys would tell it all along the trails.

"Right under the eyes of three tough and grim-eyed armed men," they'd say, "the Kid cut out the best of that herd and ran 'em off. *Barehanded,* mind you, on account of he wouldn't stoop to steal his pal's gun when he quit home. Rode out with nothing but his own outfit and a lucky silver dollar. But he was tough as ten wildcats and cunning as a coyote."

For right now, though, he'd have to play dumb until he got the set-up here on this Green Gulch range. He'd have to mask the grim look in his own eye and the hard slash of his mouth. He might even have to let them think he was just another half-starved drifter kid.

The sun, going down, was square in his eyes as he crossed the creek, and he was halfway across before he realized he was mired. Shadow darted out from the far bank, and suddenly he was conscious that it was so near sundown it was growing chill.

All the stories of quicksands he'd ever heard came desperately to his mind. Men marooned until they starved. Men strangling in muck while they looked up at a clear blue sky above them.

He patted his panicked pony and quavered, "Steady boy! We'll get out of here."

But he didn't feel too confident—a hell of a beginning for a man who aimed to be smarter and tougher than any outlaw who ever lived.

A soft chuckle came from the opposite bank. A lanky rider sat over there spreading his loop.

He drawled, quiet and easy, "Son, you'd best let me give you a hand." He let his loop fly effortlessly, and backed his pony off.

The rider's pony didn't look like much. It didn't look much better than the kid's jug-headed broomtail. But that pony was smart as a whip, and trained. It made the kid doubly conscious of his own critter's shortcomings. That wasn't going to sound so good. Or it wouldn't if he weren't smarter than most. What he'd do, though, would be to let the fact drop that his poorly piece of horseflesh was part of his disguise; part of his cunning.

He began to feel a surge of fresh self-assurance as he rode up the far bank.

The rider who had pulled him from the mire busied himself coiling his rope. "Never liked that stuff myself," he allowed. "Gives a man the willies to get trapped."

"Aw," the kid mumbled, "I been in worse scrapes."

"Well, I guess I could see that from the way you kept your head," the rider granted.

The kid preened himself a little, but reminded himself quickly he'd best not boast too much or even this drawling, lanky cow prod might catch his wild smell.

"Well, you saved me a heap of mess and trouble," the kid admitted. "Any time you need a favor, just count on me, friend."

"Why, I will do that," the rider acknowledged. "A favor's something a man can always use. Any time you hear Slim Isham is a-calling for you, you'll know it's me."

He was a friendly cuss and the kid liked him, but he could see he was just the easy-going kind whose worst trouble in life was likely getting shoved around. It kind of bothered the kid that his first friend on his outlawing saga should be such an unimportant galoot. But he guessed he could fit this Slim in all right at that.

"Proud as pot the Kid was when he was crossed," the boys would tell. "But not too proud to appreciate a good turn done by a common cowhand."

The rider hung his rope and cut sign on the kid. He nodded toward a distant wagon. "Near sundown. You might as well light at our camp for grub. The Bar X—Old Man Cam Baxter's outfit. We're making a gather."

"I ain't really hungry," the kid lied. "But it would kind of break the ride to town."

"Yeah," Slim agreed. "You got ninety miles to go yet."

The kid wasn't sure whether humor flicked in the bleached gray eyes, or if it was just good nature, but in any case the puncher turned his pony before the kid's humiliation showed. Maybe, the kid considered, he was smart enough not to want it to look like an affront.

At the wagon a big-chested man with arms like logs was starting to eat his supper. He had a fiery red beard, and hair the same color formed a halo around

his head.

Slim said to the man, "Snorky, we got us an important visitor. This is the Quicksand Kid himself. Kid, Snorky here is the Bar X segundo." He told how he'd met up with the kid.

Snorky grunted, "You mean this feller got himself into that treacherous morass and lived to tell of it without going loco?"

"Shucks, he was half out of it by the time I got there," Slim allowed. "I just saved him a little time, I reckon."

Snorky shook a long-handled fork. "Kid, that's a story you can be proud to tell. That quicksand is so bad the Spaniards buried five hundred bars of gold there and all the sojers who hauled it."

Excitement stirred through the kid. "And didn't nobody—no real tough hombres—ever try to get it out?"

"No sir. Nobody hereabouts was ever that tough and smart," Snorky allowed.

Slim, gazing off at the herd, said, "I'll ride for Two Gun while he eats, Snorky."

The kid suppressed his feeling of scorn. Now what kind of a man would just up and offer like that? Kind of reminded him of the gumptionless folks back in his own bailiwick. No real spirit or steel in them. By contrast, he could see his own tough fiber for what it was. After this rustle, when he got himself a flashy gun and outfit, he aimed to see to it that all men gave him the respect he was entitled to.

The rider named Two Gun brought his pony in at a full run and Snorky scowled at his fast stop. "Betwixt what you eat and the way you ride, you cost the Old Man more than your wages!" he growled.

Two Gun spur-dragged toward the fire and spit. "Any time Old Man Baxter don't think I'm worth the trouble, he can say!" he rasped. He put his attention on the kid. "Hello, Two Bits," he greeted. "What outlaw nest you busted in from?"

The kid paled and felt his mouth go dry, even though it set him up to have a fast, tough hombre like Two Gun recognize what he was—well, at least, what he soon would be. He guessed Two Gun had caught his smell, because the rider had the smell himself.

He took that chance when he answered, "Oh, I hung around Mauve Range some."

Snorky shot the kid an interested glance. "That so? Wild Sam Gotter's hideaway, ain't it? Maybe you know his old pard, Long John Slater?"

"Well, I've met 'em," the kid admitted. He didn't want to admit too much, but that was high riding company to be associated with. "The story is that they done busted up, though," he added with an insider's savvy.

Two Gun snorted. "They won't find things so damned easy then!"

"Why not?" Snorky demanded.

"Stands to reason," Two Gun said critically. "Two men is a heap sight bigger than two times one. They ain't going to be so tough single-handed."

Two Gun was blunt and arrogant and spoke with the authority of an hombre who had been around. The kid sized him up as an outlaw on the dodge, and had the pleasant satisfaction of recognizing his own smartness.

Slim rode back in and said he'd bedded the herd down. That just about marked Slim for what he was, the kid thought, just like Two Gun was clearly stamped.

Snorky grinned and remarked, "Two Gun here is all set to take on Wild Sam Gotter or Long John now they've busted up."

Two Gun moved awkwardly. "Well, I didn't say that, exactly," he countered. "But I say they were a heap sight tougher before they broke up."

Slim hunkered down and scratched doodles in the dust. "Seems like I heard they were tough enough alone," he commented.

The kid blurted out, "You're darned tootin! Nobody over our way would even ride a posse after 'em!"

Slim looked at him and humor touched his mouth. "You rate 'em pretty big shucks?"

The kid nodded, with homage and worship in his eyes. "They're real gun kings, both of 'em. They ride in pride and glory. But my pa says they're two-

legged catamounts."

"Your pa a rancher?" Slim asked idly.

The kid colored but admitted, "Yeah."

"Don't he need you on the place?" Snorky asked. "Cool-headed boy like you should be a heap of help."

"Well," the kid mumbled, "it's kind of poor country. I figure I can be more help sending him some money."

"You'll never make it nursing cows," Two Gun put in.

Slim looked at Two Gun curiously. "Ain't you nursing cows? What's wrong with it?"

"Well—I'm just kind of killing time," Two Gun said. "Some day I aim to get back where there's slick money for a smart hombre."

Slim looked thoughtful and said, "I always had to make my money hard. Easier it looked the harder it came. But maybe I ain't smart."

Slim took a pan of food and when he began to eat, the talk idled. The kid thought it was pretty decent of Two Gun to let Slim's remark go without taking advantage of the opening to rawhide him. That was the kind of outlaw he meant to be. Tougher than hell with the tough, but easy-going with men who wouldn't know how to handle real trouble.

When Two Gun finished eating he went back to riding herd. The other two men began to pump the kid about Mauve Range country, and Sam Gotter and Long John and other outlaws that used that sandtank for a hideaway. The kid figured he handled the talk pretty smart. They never got wise to the fact that he was on his way to being bigger than any of them ever had been.

He even baited his trap so cute that they walked right into it and offered him a riding job for a spell, while they were off beating the brush draws for scattered cows. That was just the spot he wanted. It would give him time to plan his rustle, and time to investigate that quicksand gold cache, too.

In his mind, he could hear the boys telling that part of the saga, too. "Three hundred years that gold was there and nobody ever figured a way to get it," they'd say. "But all the Kid needed was to sniff the story, and right off he figured how to get that gold."

First thing next day, he drifted over to the creek. He took a stick and poked it down into the muck and left it sticking their to study the way the quicksands swallowed it.

Snorky and Slim had gone off into the hills. They hadn't been gone long before Two Gun hailed the kid over. Two Gun liked an audience, and it was clear that he'd cut sign on the Kid's savvy, for as he told his wild stories he barely bothered to disguise names and details.

This got to be a daily occurrence. The kid was even considering it might be smart to include Two Gun in his rustling plans, but he had kind of counted on starting his career as a lone wolf. Then Two Gun must have been hired for a reason, and the kid wasn't sure the rider would want to rustle this outfit, although he sounded game for anything where there was a chance for easy money.

He was still debating the matter the evening Slim rode in black with sweat and dust and breathing hard with strain, and told Snorky, "That big red steer got sand-trapped on his side and was damn near drowning in a trickle of water."

Snorky shot the kid a sharp glance and growled, "You were riding that creek line, kid. Why didn't you look it over?"

The kid felt mighty small and guilty, but Slim put in, "I don't reckon the Kid could see the steer, Snorky. He was down in a cutback of the bank." He gave the kid a look of mild reprimand. "But those are the things you've got to watch for if you aim to be a cowboy."

The kid thought that was pretty decent, covering him like that, for Slim must have cut sign and known he had failed to ride the full length of his fence, and so it followed that he must have been fiddle-footing. He aimed to cut that out. If Two Gun wanted to palaver, he could ride across to the kid's line.

Yes, sir, when they told the kid's saga, he didn't want 'em putting in anything

like that. "Blizzard, flood or desert," he wanted them to say. "Nothing mattered to the Kid while he was on the job."

Still and all, it was just one more point that showed a man could get too easy-going. He would bet that if Two Gun had found that steer down, he'd have come hotfooting in to make the kid lend a hand at saving him, and the kid would have respected him for it.

He'd been riding about two weeks when a cloud of dust came up the valley one afternoon, and long before riders formed clearly in the haze, he could see the flash of a sheriff's star. Snorky came in from riding herd and kicked up a fire for java.

Two deputies rode over and cut sign on the kid, and grinned at him, never suspecting that in another week or so, he'd be the man they wanted. They cut through the fanned-out herd and stopped to talk with Two Gun, and the kid watched them with his heart chugging, wondering if they meant to take Two Gun in.

But they didn't stop with him long, and the kid thought that was funny, and then he thought, no it wasn't; it was just the sign they didn't hanker to breast any two-gun hombre who'd speak up for himself like Two Gun would. Maybe they even wanted him for something, but didn't have the guts to push it.

They stopped a long time though, talking with Slim, and the kid could just picture the way Slim was putting himself out being pleasant and sociable to those deputies. Not that there was anything wrong with that, but they were just plain hired lawdogs—beneath a real badman's notice. He intended to treat the Law with the same cool contempt Billy the Kid did.

Then Snorky broke up his day-dreaming with a yell, and the kid rode in to fetch some water.

The sheriff had come back and was talking with Snorky, asking, "How long that lanky galoot been with you?"

"Oh, 'bout five months," Snorky told him. "Good man far as I know. Can't say where he rode in from. Never saw him before. Anything wrong with him?"

"Reckon not," the sheriff said. "But he's sure long and gangling. Can't help noticing that in any man when you're after Wild Sam Gotter and Long John Slater."

"Thought they'd split up," Snorky grunted.

The sheriff looked cynical. "Nice handy story if you could make folks believe it," he allowed. "It was Gotter's outfit all right that done the job we're wanting him for. He was identified and maybe shot, or one of their horses was. If it wasn't Long John with him, it was his double."

Snorky nodded toward Slim. "Well, that man ain't been out of my sight for a month at least."

The sheriff lifted his burly shoulders and let them drop. "Ain't our man, then."

The kid thought some of the things Snorky had said to the sheriff were kind of funny—like saying he'd never seen Slim before, and the kid knew that wasn't so, because he'd heard Slim and Snorky talking now and then. They'd said things that only old friends could know about to say. And he'd got an idea that Snorky didn't exactly side Slim in everything. That didn't surprise the kid, because Snorky was big and bluff—the up-and-at-'em kind of hombre. He couldn't see eye to eye with anybody as soft and easy-going as Slim Isham.

The kid wondered for a moment why Snorky had told the sheriff all that, then he couldn't bother thinking any more. Too much was going on. He looked at the sheriff, and his eyes bugged. The grim excitement of a manhunt pumped through him. He was just busting to talk, to tell 'em all the stories of Wild Sam and Long John he'd heard back in his home country.

He was smart enough to hold his tongue, though. He never let that sheriff suspect that some day he might be coming after *him.*

The posse had java and sandwiches and passed on up the valley. Their dust was still hanging in the air when Two Gun came tearing in to get the details. He was like a fretted colt smelling horse hunters on the wind.

"They didn't say nothing a-tall about

me?" he kept demanding.

"Nothing," Snorky told him with a grin. "Except that you'd best stop by the Wagonwheel some time and return their saddle."

"Aw, that was just a borrow," Two Gun growled, coloring. "I needed it real quick."

"Well," Snorky grunted, "long as you don't look like Wild Sam or Long John, you're safe."

"I got my own looks to worry about," Two Gun said mysteriously.

Snorky failed to fathom that. But the kid got it, and knew that somewhere there was a flyer out for Two Gun, and that it was something a heap sight more important than a Wagonwheel saddle that had him worried.

Around dusk, Slim came in, as mild and quiet as if there'd been no excitement. He was kind of thoughtful, though, and mentioned the thought on his mind. "I wonder if we'll see him."

He made the remark so casual that it almost went unnoticed. Then Two Gun's whole body tautened and he snapped Slim a look as if he'd heard a rattler.

"You mean Gotter?"

"Could be," Slim grunted, and made himself easier lounging against a wagon wheel. "If their ponies got shot up and they're heading this way, this is a good stop."

Two Gun's jaws hardened. "That's right—if they need ponies. And they wouldn't give a man a chance, either! I'm damned if I'm riding herd tonight."

Snorky looked at him. "I thought it was the sheriff you were afraid of?"

"I ain't afraid of nobody!" Two Gun rasped. "But I've got my reasons for not wanting to be a target for them two hombres, and you can bet if they stop by, they'll know I'm here."

"I'm more worried about them knowing this herd's here," Snorky said. The firelight played on his face and the kid had never seen him so set and severe. "And you can bet your bottom dollar every one of us is riding tonight!"

Slim snagged off a chew and quidded it deliberately. "I figure this, Snorky," he allowed. "Them hombres have got to ride fast. They wouldn't want cattle along to slow 'em. But they might stampede the herd to cover up while grabbing fresh ponies."

Snorky looked at him attentively. It crossed the kid's mind that Snorky had a lot of respect for Slim.

"We could bunch the herd against the creek," Slim went on, "and leave a fire in camp so they can see things good. We can bring in the rough string and corral it near camp while we ride herd. They'll figure that for a lay-off and grab fresh ponies and supplies and dust."

"Who you got in mind to ride the camp fence?" Two Gun rasped.

Slim looked at him a moment. "I don't mind," he said.

Two Gun flushed, but scowled. "Well, I don't reckon you'd be running the same risk I would!"

Snorky said to Slim, "There ain't no reason for that. I can switch off with you."

Slim said, "I reckon my luck will hold. I ain't ever been shot dead yet." He grinned at the kid. "But I'd swap that lucky dollar off you for something extra, kid. What would you say to that little five-shot Sharpes?"

The kid's eyes sprang wide. The Sharpes was only a .22, but it was *muy hombre* in a gambling game. Wouldn't rightly kill a man, but it could pink hell out of him and show him your contempt.

The kid could just hear the way the boys would tell it, "Even in that tough saloon, the Kid wouldn't stoop to use his kill-gun on a tinhorn. He just sat there with nothing but that little Sharpes and put his chill eyes on the crooked gambler and told him, 'I'll take that pot, mister!' And the crook didn't dare move, for all that he was wearing a forty-four!"

Yes, sir, that would sound real handsome in the telling, and beside, it would feel right comfortable to be packing a gun tonight, even a little one. And he'd be right proud for Slim to tote his lucky dollar. Even if Slim was kind of on the cau-

tious side, he'd volunteered for the dangerous post, and the kid guessed a man had a right to caution rather than wanting to fight things out with bad hombres like Wild Sam and Long John.

So the kid fished out his lucky dollar and shined it on his shirt, and Slim pulled his warbag out of the wagon and got out the neatest little gun and holster the kid had ever seen. Sharpes hadn't done so well with their big sixgun, but their little one was tops. All bronze and etched steel and a nifty little revolving hammer.

Two Gun had gone out to bring in the cavvy, and he was back real quick, too, hunkered down with more java. He was chain smoking and looking nervous and proddy, and the kid thought he must have some real feud on with the wanted outlaws. Maybe some feud over a pet double-cross or division of loot.

Slim had sprawled out against the wagon wheel again, hat cocked forward, and Snorky was making sandwiches on the tail-gate of the wagon, allowing, "We'll make a night fire out on the flats for java soon as we bed the herd against the creek."

"You won't need no bedding!" a rough voice cracked out of the darkness.

That voice held something the kid had never heard. It held a brute violence that put cold fear racing down his spine. There wasn't any brave heroism or glory in that sound. It was pure wicked.

The camp froze. The kid couldn't have moved if he had wanted to. The tin cup shook in Two Gun's hands, then dropped, its contents hissing in the firebed.

There was movement in the thick outer shadows. "You got a rifle beaded dead on you, too," the voice out there said.

A rough figure advanced into the circle of firelight. Eyes glowed red and savage and utterly ruthless as the man counted the lumps of shadow.

"Four of you," he grunted. "Make one false move and there won't be that many!" He looked at the kid. "Half pint, drop that pea-shooter and gather the guns here and do it careful!"

The kid swallowed hard and his teeth chattered. He dropped his gun and felt a wave of hot shame in doing it, but he'd never known fear like this—core-deep, freezing. This hombre meant business. This was Gotter! Wild Sam Gotter!"

"Get moving pronto!" Gotter commanded and swung his gun.

The kid jerked erect like he'd been kicked. He moved jerkily in the grim, dead silence, and he wouldn't have felt any worse walking through a snake nest. He couldn't clench his jaws to hold them still, and he couldn't catch his breath, and somewhere in his chest a pent-up yell was exploding.

He knew what outright hate was. The hate of shame. He had admired the stories he heard of Gotter, but in one instant all of his hero worship had vanished. The man was a killing brute who would murder with no more conscience than a snake.

Part of the kid's mind worked on that in spite of his cold fear. He could just hear the way the boys would tell it in the saloons later. "Sly as a badger, the Kid never tipped his hand. He played dumb. He played scared. But all the time he was just waiting for the chance to get at Gotter without endangering the others."

Gotter barked, "Damn you, I said *move!*" and threw a shot that scorched the kid's shoe leather. The heroic saga died in the kid's head.

Nothing was in his head any more but fear and panic and hate, and the sting of that burning foot. He dumped out Two Gun's holsters and was only dimly conscious of Two Gun's violent shaking. He clawed out Snorky's gun. Snorky stood unmoving. The kid could smell fear's sweat popping out on him, but he could feel Snorky's mind working, to think of something he might do.

So could Gotter. He snarled, gave an ugly laugh. He advised Snorky, "Friend, you ain't going to do nothing with that knife you're holding!" His gun barked again and there was a metallic *ping-g-g-g* and Snorky exploded a grunt of pain at the stinging in his hand.

Gotter was feeling easier. He jerked his head with contempt at Slim's shadow.

"Catch out Lazy's gun!" he ordered.

He stood straighter now with his gun held more loosely in his hand. Savage arrogance came out of him in a raw smell. He was an outlaw who held the whip and who'd take brute pleasure in using it.

"Maybe you hombres got some idea," he grated, "that you'll ride after that posse when we're gone. There ain't any of you going to ride again for quite a few weeks. You'll be damned grateful just to be alive." He broke off and stared at Slim. He sneered, "Long and lanky and not worth—" His stare grew harder. His voice was a harsh bark as he commanded, "Hold on there! I want to see what you look like, friend!"

The kid had started to step across Slim which threw a momentary shift of shadow. In that instant Slim's left arm struck the kid like a boom and sent him sprawling against Snorky's legs. Snorky piled down atop the kid. From the corner of his eye, the kid saw the ugly orange blaze of Gotter's gun and heard the *twang* of his shot on the hub bolt.

The next instant, Slim's gun barked in unison with Gotter's second shot. Gotter's head jerked up and back and the gun in his hand tilted down and came free of his grip and swung crazily on his trigger finger. His knees sagged, and a harsh animal sound came from his throat. Then he turned sideward and sprawled in the dust.

A rifle shot came out of darkness and Two Gun howled and sprang forward and sprawled across the fire. Slim answered the shot and rolled in a blur of shadow. A curse came out of darkness, another shot, and then the sound of a starting pony.

Snorky rolled clear of the kid, clawed for his gun where it lay on the ground and triggered his full load at the retreating hoofbeats. Two Gun just lay groaning.

Another horse started up as Slim hit leather and merged with the darkness. Snorky lay listening. Finally, he got up. The acrid smell of powder mixed with the stench of scorching clothing and flesh, a sickening smell upon night's clean air.

Snorky stood looking down at Two Gun a minute, then blasted a breath of contempt. He picked Two Gun up by the belts and heaved him clear of the fire.

"Pinked in the shoulder and passed out with fear!" he muttered. He took a bucket of water and sluiced the fire out of Two Gun's clothing.

"You all right, kid?" he asked then.

The kid chattered a sound of acknowledgement.

Snorky nodded and poured them both java and stood in shadow listening into the night.

"Hope he's all right," he muttered, drank, and hunkered down and studied Two Gun's wound.

A rifle shot rolled its flat bark across the night, and then two pistol shots. There was a space of dead silence, then a third pistol shot.

Snorky gave a single nod of relief. "Slim's gun. He's all right."

Two Gun came to, groaning.

"Shut up," Snorky muttered. "I'll cut the slug out in a minute." He went to the wagon and felt around and came back holding an empty bottle. "So you couldn't even leave the whisky alone?" he demanded of the wounded man.

"I ain't touched it!" Two Gun groaned.

"Well, it sure ain't left to touch now when you need it!" Snorky rasped with disgust.

He stooped and ripped aside Two Gun's shirt and Two Gun howled. Snorky stared, then straightened and looked at the man with utter contempt.

"Why, the bullet ain't in you! It just gouged." He pivoted angrily and said, "Get some wood, kid."

Slim walked his horse back in. He joggled a limp body from behind his cantle and watched it roll face up in the firelight. He stepped down then and examined Gotter more closely, then gave the man he'd brought in a prod with his boot.

He looked at Snorky with an expressionless face. "You got any of them good cheroots left?" he asked.

Same lazy drawl as always. No sign, except for the icy light of his eyes, that

he'd just fought and killed two men.

Snorky reached for a box of cigars from in back of the chuck. Slim put a light to one and poured himself a cup of java. Between sips, he fished down in a vest pocket and got out the kid's lucky dollar and examined it.

He flipped it to the kid. He said, "That was right good luck, friend!" The dollar was bent and there was a bump of some other metal in the middle of it.

Slim got his bedroll and warbag and threw in some supplies. The kid was sparking with excitement now, examining the lucky dollar.

"Well," Slim said to Snorky, "it was a right pleasant stop with you, and I'll enjoy them cheroots."

"I don't figure you need to dust," Snorky said. "The sheriff don't know Long John, and that dead galoot there fits the picture."

"Too much palaver," Slim said. He frowned a minute at the tip of his cigar. "Be better than fifteen hundred on Gotter's head," he said. "And something like it on Long John. I want the kid to have a decent horse and outfit and take half that money home to his pa."

"But shucks, I aim to be a gun king!" the kid yipped. "I done earned my right, ain't I?"

Slim gave a hard grin. "Outlaws ain't nice people, kid," he said. "You keep that little gun I gave you and don't ever figure you need a bigger one."

He put his warbag aboard his horse and swung up into the saddle. He gave Snorky a particular look. "The kid won't want to see this."

Snorky pulled the kid against him, but the kid could see under his arm. He saw Slim's face harden, his nostril pinch, his eyes go thin. Then he saw him put six shots deliberately into the face of the dead man he'd brought in.

"Well, so long," Slim said. He put his horse into a lope and left.

Horror that was cold and twisting gripped the kid. He broke away from Snorky and went outside the firelight and retched. For some reason, the killing hadn't effected him much, but that last act of Slim's had. It had been brutal.

He kept thinking, What did he have to do that for?

Then it dawned on him at last that Slim was the real Long John! This other man with Gotter had just been somebody who resembled him, and Slim had just helped to boost the reward, or maybe give the sheriff a little extra trouble with identification.

But still Slim didn't have to shoot the man after he was dead. It took cold callousness to mutilate like that.

The kid got to thinking about what Slim had said about outlaws. He guessed Slim ought to know. And there'd been no flash and dash and glory to Slim or Gotter or Gotter's pardner. And Two Gun who'd had the flash had shown yellow.

Of a sudden, the kid didn't want to be an outlaw or a gunhand any more. He didn't even care much whether the Spanish gold was in the creek or not. He guessed all he really wanted was just to be a common cowhand and help his pa. It was enough glory that Slim had asked Snorky to cut him in on the reward, and to hear Snorky tell the sheriff how he'd acted like a man when the outlaws had walked in on them.

He just knew that Snorky and Slim had one time been friends. And Slim had been hiding out here with the Bar X outfit because he'd known Snorky wouldn't give him away. Maybe Snorky had his reasons for that, too, but he wasn't ever going to tell them—now.

Anyhow, what Snorky had told the Law about the kid was a heap more than he could say about Two Gun, who had ridden off, hanging his head in shame.

At that, it would all make a pretty nice story to have the boys tell around Mauve Range. "Yes, sir," they'd say, "he had his chance to ride off pardners with Long John himself, but he let the gold and the glory go. He was satisfied to come home and bring his pa some money. You'd never think he'd risked his life and braved Wild Sam Gotter—just quiet and modest, and never changed a-tall." ● ● ●

The patrol was fighting for life

CANYON AMBUSH

By GORDON D. SHIRREFFS

With the odds dead against him, a good army man, like a good poker player, must sometimes try a bluff. And sometimes it works . . .

THE fight exploded across the flats with incredible speed — Apaches afoot and troopers ahorse. One moment the patrol was riding silently through a land of mesquite, cactus and sand, and the next fighting for life as Apaches, hidden in holes covered with dusty gray blankets, rose up out of them like screeching devils

from hell.

Lieutenant Colin Wallace saw Pete Rinehart, the civilian scout, bowled from his saddle by a cast war club. Wallace knew he was dead.

Powdersmoke swirled across the flats. Carbines thumped, and a horse screamed as a warrior gutted it, then sank the same blade to the hilt in a trooper's thigh.

Second Lieutenant Rezin Barnard rose in his stirrups, slashing at thick-maned heads with his Solingen saber, and emptying his service Colt with the other hand. As Wallace dropped a buck who was aiming a shotgun at Sergeant Wheeler he saw Barnard look back over his shoulder between blows of his saber. Colin Wallace could not help but grin.

It was over almost before it had a chance to sink into the senses. The Apaches vanished up a dry wash, leaving four dead and three wounded. The veteran troopers had fought instinctively, almost without thought, and so were still alive. The recruits had not fared so well. Their hands had fumbled; their senses had been panicked at the sight of Apaches where no Apaches should be. It had cost the patrol two dead and three wounded.

Rezin Barnard cantered back to Wallace, sheathing his saber. He had lost his hat. Sweat trickled down his face.

"What now, Colin?" he asked. "Pursuit?"

Wallace reloaded his Colt. He shook his head. "And walk into another ambush? Perhaps worse than this?"

Barnard mopped his face and took his hat from Corporal Chamette. "Pete Rinehart is dead," he said quietly, and Wallace nodded.

Sergeant Wheeler kneed his horse close to the lieutenant's gray. "Privates Endries and Orcutt killed, sir. Corporal Kennet, Privates Martin and Royce wounded. None seriously." Wheeler wiped his mouth. "There are three wounded Apaches, sir." His eyes held Wallace's.

"You know what to do."

Barnard's mouth tightened. "No prisoners?" he asked.

Wallace thrust his Colt into holster. "Perhaps you haven't heard, Mr. Barnard, but this is a war of attrition. Department orders are to stick on Gadoa's trail and never let up. Gadoa doesn't take prisoners. Neither do we."

"That puts us in the same class as savages then, doesn't it?"

LIEUTENANT WALLACE felt in his pocket for his chewing tobacco and offered it to Barnard. The second lieutenant shook his head, trying hard to keep the look of disgust from his face. Wallace bit off a chew and masticated it slowly.

Suddenly three shots thumped out. Barnard paled a little. Wallace jerked a thumb over his shoulder.

"Anyone who goes to war, Mr. Barnard, must learn to peel off the veneer of civilization if the situation warrants it."

Barnard kneed his horse away. Colin Wallace raised his voice. "Another thing, Mr. Barnard. Don't look back for help when in the middle of a Donnybrook out here. You're on your own. You'll get out of the habit after a time. I had it for awhile and outgrew it. Depend on yourself and your weapons." He grinned as the young shavetail spurred away and slid from his horse beside a wounded trooper.

"He'll do, sir." Wallace turned. Sergeant Wheeler was reloading his Colt. He looked after Barnard. "He was as surprised as the rest of us, sir. But that saber of his was out and cutting before I had my Colt cocked. He'll do." Wheeler gravely accepted the plug of tobacco from the lieutenant and bit off a chew. "Now what, Mr. Wallace?"

The lieutenant rested his forearms on his pommel and looked off to the west. The sun was setting over the Mazatzals. A thin spiral of dust rose between the patrol and the mountains and moved slowly south. A shovel grated against the soil as Corporal Chamette prepared to bury the dead.

The patrol had been out for three weeks now and the men were wearing thin. Wallace had eighteen men left of the twenty-

five-man patrol with which he had left Fort Apache. Three had died in the scrap at Cherry Creek. Two wounded men lay in a ranchhouse near Canyon Creek. He had received orders three times from the heliograph stations scattered throughout the mountains.

Keep on the trail—Do not let up

He said slowly, "Tell Gutfreund to get out his heliograph. He has enough sun left to flash a message to Aguja Peak. Tell them what has happened. Ask for further orders."

Gutfreund unlashed his heliograph mirror and stand and set it up. He began to flash the message. When he was done he took out a stub of pencil and a pad of paper, slanted his hat over his eyes and looked expectantly at Aguja Peak. Suddenly there was a flash from the peak. Rapidly the heliograph winked its message across thirty miles of Apache-haunted wilderness. Gutfreund finished writing and handed the message to Lieutenant Wallace. It read:

Uprising at Cibecue Creek. Troops diverted from pursuing Gadoa to quell. No relief for you at present. Gadoa has received reenforcements. Believed now to number close to one hundred warriors. You are largest force in his area. Keep on trail. Do not let up. Acknowledge. Signed Custis, Colonel.

Wallace dismounted and looked at Sergeant Wheeler. "Rest horses, Sergeant. Get those dead out of sight. We move out as soon as we're done here."

"No relief, sir?"

Wallace shook his head. "No relief." He knelt by the side of the heliographer. "Acknowledge, Gutfreund."

He waited until the stolid German had finished. The heliographer looked at him curiously.

"Gutfreund, you and I are the only two men on this patrol who know what's in this message. I want you to keep your mouth shut."

"Ja. It is bad, Mr. Wallace?"

Colin Wallace stood up. "We're not dead yet, if that's any consolation."

"Ja." Gutfreund dismantled his instrument. "The lieutenant will ged us back to the fort safely. I am not afraid. I keep the mouth shud!"

Half an hour later Corporal Chamette led out his point of two men. The patrol swung up on their mounts and headed southwest. Wallace looked down at the three mounded graves with his hat in his hand. Endries had been with him for two years; a heavy drinker but a good trooper. Orcutt had joined the troop from Jefferson Barracks not a week before the patrol. He could not have been more than eighteen.

REZIN BARNARD reined in beside Wallace. "I don't have to ask you what the message said, Colin. No relief, eh?"

"It's worse than that. There has been an uprising at Cibecue Creek. Some of the troops after Gadoa have been ordered there. Gadoa is gaining more warriors for his filthy work. Nothing brings recruits to join a war chief like Gadoa more surely than continued success. He has made fools of us." He swung up on his gray and touched his hat in salute to the grave of Pete Rinehart. "I can't understand why Gadoa hit us out here. Attacking twenty-two of us in the open seems like suicide to me. He lost more men than we did."

He touched spurs to his horse. He waved a gauntleted hand. "Gadoa is clever," he said, as they rode. "Far more clever than we at first thought. Apaches are guerillas. They ride to a place of ambush and fight on foot. The dawn attack, the swift raid is their forte. They do not like open fighting. But Gadoa has changed all that. He knows how long we've been out. We have been watched ever since we entered these mountains. His tactics follow a pattern. He hits us where we least expect to be hit."

"What does he gain by it? He usually fights for loot, not for glory."

"He has slowed us down. He knows we must be more cautious than ever, that we can't travel fast for fear of another ambush. Meanwhile he rides where he damned well pleases with his main body

of warriors, leaving a handful of men behind to delay us. Now he has things his way. We are the largest body of troops in the area. There's a jest if I've ever heard one. Gadoa must know that by now. He has us bluffed and stymied."

"So?"

Wallace shrugged. "We're damned if we fight him and damned if we don't. But we keep on his trail until we run out of men."

He halted the patrol for the night on a ridge that rose like a knife blade out of the desert floor. Wheeler saw to it that the horses were on individual picket pins off the skyline.

Wallace sat for a long time on a rock looking to the southwest. He knew the country well enough, but he missed Pete Rinehart's intimate knowledge of it. Sergeant Wheeler had been through there several times as escort for supply trains, but that was the limit of *his* knowledge.

Ten miles to the southwest lay Split Canyon, a huge Y-shaped affair, with the stem pointing northeast. The largest branch of the canyon angled off almost due south, the smaller to the southwest. Gadoa was known to use Split Canyon in his flights toward the Border when things got too rough. There was little chance Gadoa would run for the Border now. Things were going his way.

Wallace glanced back at the patrol. They were raveling out. There was no banter as they ate their embalmed beef and drank the tepid water from their canteens. Even McCurdy, the wit, was silent and thoughtful. Rezin Barnard sat with his elbows on his knees, hands interlaced, studying his boots. They had been a bootmaker's delight when he'd left Fort Apache. Now his toes peeped out of one and the other had a three-inch slit along one side.

Wallace couldn't help but grin. The polish was wearing off rather fast. He wondered what would be beneath the polish.

Lieutenant Wallace was up before dawn, throwing back his blanket and shivering as the cold air met his sweat-damp shirt. He rose and stretched stiffly, then picked up his carbine.

Sergeant Wheeler was snoring gently beneath a mesquite bush, but Corporal Chamette materialized out of the gloom and came close.

"All quiet, sir," he said.

"Anything suspicious?"

"Private Staboti claims he saw fires to the north."

"Fires?"

"More like signals, sir. Flashes now and then."

"Where?"

Chamette turned and pointed north. "On the side of Cuchillo Peak." He moved his arm eastward. "On Dark Mountain, and toward the hills to the south of Dark Mountain."

WALLACE rubbed his bristly jaw. His orders were to patrol as far as Split Canyon, then return north along the base of the Mazatzals. Ten miles to the canyon and ten miles back to where they were now made twenty miles, and Cuchillo Peak was a good thirty miles north. He itched to break camp and ride north for it was a cinch no troops would be careless enough to show fires at night with Gadoa prowling about.

"Awaken the men, Chamette. Have coffee made down in that hollow near the horses. Double the horse guards." He bent then and gripped the second lieutenant's shoulder. "Rise and shine, Mr. Barnard."

Barnard threw back his blanket. "For the love of God, Colin! It's the middle of the night."

Wallace grinned. "Just before dawn, Rezin. Wouldn't you rather have me awaken you than have an Apache feeling for your guts with a ten-foot lance?"

"You're a cheerful soul!"

"We'll have coffee soon. Up on your feet. Get down by the horses and keep your eyes peeled."

Barnard looked about. "It's as quiet as the grave," he said.

Wallace nodded. "Too damned quiet." He turned away and then looked back

over his shoulder. "Watch yourself. Keep your Colt in your hand—cocked!"

The eastern sky grew light. A cold wind swept across the bivouac as the men lay silently behind rocks with ready carbines. Wallace watched the graying landscape with slitted eyes. Each mesquite bush, each rock, might contain an Apache, stripped to the G-string, with greased body and honed knife, hungry for the blood of the hated white-eyes. There were horses and mules for the taking below the ridge.

The men's eyes were never still. Now and then if a recruit shifted, the eyes turned toward him and he lay still. Wallace looked down the slope. Rezin Barnard stood by his mount's head, his cocked Colt hanging in his right hand, his saber in his left. A thin wisp of smoke rose from the hollow where a trooper had made a fire of dry mesquite twigs.

Suddenly it was light. The rising sun tinted the eastern sky rose and gold, and brought out the sharp line of the Mazatzals in incredible relief. Wallace turned to Sergeant Wheeler. "Take two men. Scout the area."

The sun had tipped the eastern mountains when Wheeler returned and grounded his carbine. "Quiet, sir. As deserted as a saloon the night before pay-day." Wheeler looked to the north. "But there's something going on up there, Mr. Wallace."

A thread of smoke rose steadily from Cuchillo Peak. Rezin Barnard climbed up beside Wallace. "What does it mean, Colin?"

Wallace shrugged. "A burning wagon. A prospector's fire. Most anything."

Barnard looked at Sergeant Wheeler. "Do you agree, Sergeant?"

Wheeler glanced at the lieutenant. "No. And no offense to Mr. Wallace, for I think he'll agree with me. If that smoke is what I think it is someone is in for trouble."

"Gadoa?"

"Probably, Mr. Barnard. He's gathering his men. . . . "

Hours later the saddle-weary troopers eased their crotches and stretched their backs in a draw near the entrance of Split Canyon. The sun beat down from a yellow sky. The troopers' lean faces were masked with dust.

Colin Wallace clambered up a rocky slope and dropped on his belly at the top, to study the canyon. It stretched emptily, the only sign of life a ragged buzzard that circled slowly over some carrion. He took his field-glasses from their case and shaded his hat over them to keep the sun from reflecting from the lenses.

The smaller, southwestern branch of the canyon shimmered in the haze, rugged and deserted, a rough road, even for an Apache. The larger, southern branch was deserted also. On a shoulder of rock, almost obstructing the canyon, sat the deserted ruins of old Fort McLeod, the adobes slowly crumbling back into the very earth from which they had been made.

Wallace turned as Rezin Barnard dropped down beside him. "See anything?" he asked.

THE lieutenant shook his head. He handed the young shavetail the field-glasses. Barnard focused them on the ruins.

"What's that?" he asked. "Spanish or Mexican ruins?"

"Fort McLeod. Abandoned in Eighteen Sixty-one when all Federal troops withdrew from Arizona."

"Abandoned? I never knew there had been a post in here."

Wallace grinned. "You're new to the Army, sonny. You'll find places like this all over the Southwest."

Barnard looked puzzled. "That's a perfect place for a post, Colin. Why, Gadoa would be forced to find another way to the Border if that was garrisoned."

Wallace lay on his back and stretched. "True. That post was built on the recommendation of a man who knew that. It did its job well, too. It was a hell of a place from what I've heard about it. Isolated, hot, dangerous and practically forgotten by the War Department. Half

a dozen suicides. Officers and enlisted men both, lie in the old graveyard up beyond the post. Three murdered men lie there, too, not far from the men who were hung for killing them. Yes, it was a living hell on earth, but it stopped the Apaches from using it as Gadoa uses it now."

"It seems to me the Army would save a great many men and a great deal of time if they garrisoned it again."

Wallace laughed. "You want to know why they don't?" he asked drily. "I'll tell you why. It costs too much to freight in forage for the horses and mules. Water has to be brought in during dry spells. The road would have to be repaired. That costs money—money which has *not* been allocated to the War Department. So we spend our time killing our horses, losing good men, and letting a fiend like Gadoa run loose. All because we do not have the allocation."

"It seems rather short-sighted."

"*That's* the understatement of the year! It's not short-sightedness—it's downright stupidity!" The lieutenant got up and cased his glasses. "Come on. We'll ride up to the post. It's part of the patrol. And it has the only water for twenty-five miles. We'll leave at dawn tomorrow, headed north, and God help us if we run into Gadoa coming into the canyon!"

The walls of the canyon rose high on either hand as the patrol led their horses toward Fort McLeod. Brittle bush mesquite and cactus stippled the floor of the canyon and the lower walls. The canyon held the heat of the day like a great trough.

Now and then a wind-devil, generated by the air currents of the canyon, rose from the sandy floor and whirled through the patrol, filling their eyes, noses and mouths with grit. White rocks bordered the dry wash that followed the course of the canyon, gleaming in the sun like the skulls of long dead men.

There was a brooding quality about the place. Men looked back over their shoulders, although there was nothing to see, and voices were dropped to a whisper, although there was no one to hear.

Lieutenant Wallace reined in his gray and waved a hand to indicate the ruins before them.

"Fort McLeod," he said. Barnard shoved back his hat and hooked a leg around his pommel, studying the ruins of adobes, jacales and stone buildings that covered the rock shoulder. Beyond the buildings, on a sterile slope, were the humped mounds of graves. Broken bottles lay on the weed-covered parade ground, tinted pink and blue by the suns of many years. A rabbit scuttled for cover as a trooper's horse nibbled at a bush.

Sergeant Wheeler rode to the west side of the post and glanced down the slope. He stood up in his stirrups and called back, "There's enough water here for tonight, sir!"

"Mr. Barnard," said Wallace, "take evening stables. Water horses in half an hour. Corporal Chamette! On the double!"

Chamette came up. "Yes, sir."

"Take Private Gutfreund across the canyon to that high ridge. Signal Aguja Peak. Tell them we are here; and that there are no sign of Apaches. Will return north tomorrow. Ask for information as to where Gadoa was last seen. Take three men with you as guards. And, Corporal, make damned sure your flashing is not seen to the east. I don't want Gadoa to spot us."

HE WAS looking down into the shallow rock tank west of the fort, watching the last horse drink its fill and hoping there *might* be enough water left to wash out a pair of socks that he had worn for a week, when Chamette reappeared.

"Well?" he asked.

Chamette lowered his voice. "Gadoa ran into a column headed for Cibecue Creek. He was shot up pretty badly and took off, headed this way. The column was under orders for Cibecue and couldn't chase him."

"Go on."

Chamette wiped his forehead. "He can't go east, sir. They've put a strong infantry guard, with gatlings, in Lone

Pass. Colonel Custis is sure they're riding here. Your orders are to stop him. All troops south of Split Canyon have been pulled out for Cibecue."

Wallace whistled. If Gadoa got past the patrol he would hit the area south of the canyon like a flash flood. Heretofore he had used the canyon for escape only. If he got through it and found out that the area to the south was defenseless it would be a field day for him.

Twenty men against a hundred! If the patrol met him in the open, the men would be cut down like weeds. Their horses were worn to the quick and the men were not much better.

"It looks bad, eh, sir?" asked Chamette.

"We're the stopper in the bottle, Corporal."

"We've still time to pull out, sir."

Wallace shook his head. "No. The job has to be done here." He turned and paced slowly up the slope to the fort.

The men off duty were cooking their evening meal. Smoke rose, to be dissipated by the wind. The lieutenant wondered when the last cook fires had smoked at Fort McLeod. He looked off to the mouth of the canyon and suddenly closed a fist.

"Mr. Barnard!" he called. "Sergeant Wheeler!" They doubled over to him. "Listen! Gadoa has been turned back from up north. Indications are that he's heading this way. The area to the south of Split Canyon is bare of troops. We have orders to stop him. Here!"

"For the love of God!" said Barnard.

Sergeant Wheeler whistled and stared.

Wallace gripped the second lieutenant's arm. "I've got a plan. Weak maybe—crazy maybe. But a plan!"

"I'll listen to anything," said Barnard.

Wallace looked about the fort. "Gadoa won't be here until some time tomorrow morning. He still thinks Fort McLeod is deserted."

Barnard looked at him queerly. "Well, isn't it?"

"We're going to pull a bluff on him. We're going to give this post the appearance of being occupied."

"And?"

"He may strike it. He may not. If he doesn't, there's only one place for him to go. Up the other leg of this canyon. He'll be in a Godawful hurry."

"So?"

"We drygulch the damned coyote!"

Barnard glanced at Sergeant Wheeler. The noncom shrugged.

"Now let me get this straight, Colin," said Barnard slowly. "You're going to garrison this post and ambush Gadoa with twenty men?"

Wallace took the young officer by the arm. "You'll be the post commander, Rezin. I'll leave you eight men. We'll corral the horses and mules here. We have twenty-two horses and eight mules. Gadoa will think twice before he hits a post garrisoned by thirty men."

"But we haven't thirty men!"

"Then it's up to you to make eight men *look* like thirty. Or forty! Or fifty!"

Rezin swallowed hard. "I did all right in theatricals at the Point, Colin, but I never thought I'd use my histrionic ability out here to impress a hundred Apaches."

WHEELER grinned. "What about the rest of the plan, sir?"

"Tonight we'll try to give this place the appearance of again being garrisoned. Clean the weeds off the parade. Fill up some of the fallen walls. We'll take parts of uniforms from each man who goes with me and make a few dummies. We'll have fires lit, and play trumpet calls to impress our friend, Gadoa."

"And if he turns back?"

"I'll be in the other leg of the canyon with the rest of the men. One man to keep watch on the post from the ridge in between the two canyon branches. If Gadoa attacks here we'll try to get back over the ridge in time to help you."

"And if he attacks you?"

The lieutenant shrugged. "We gamble on eleven men under cover being able to stop a hundred in the open."

There was no sleep that night at old Fort McLeod. Details cut the weeds from

the parade ground and filled in the biggest holes. Other men filled up the biggest gaps in the ruins and cut the weeds from the adobe roofs. Corporal Chamette rebuilt the corral, using sun-dried poles he found still stacked behind the old quartermaster shed. Corporal Kennet confiscated parts of uniforms from each trooper and made dummies which were placed in strategic places.

Two hours before dawn Colin called the command together on the parade ground.

"This force is the only one able, in any sense, to destroy or delay Gadoa. We are gambling on the Apache's dislike of fighting in the open against fortified troops. You men with Mr. Barnard are going to make a colossal bluff. You are all gamblers, else you wouldn't have joined the cavalry for frontier service. If Gadoa turns back from this branch of the pass there is just one place for him to go—up the other branch. The best shots will go with me and we'll wait for him there. We have no supports and no reserve. Any questions?"

"What's in it for us if we do the job, sir?"

At sound of the voice that came out of the darkness at the rear of the assembled men Colin Wallace grinned. There was no mistaking Trooper McCurdy. The lieutenant raised his own voice. "A three-day pass."

"And if we don't do the job, sir?"

"I'll promote each dead private to corporal!"

Wallace was still grinning when his detail formed at the edge of the fort. He eyed them. Sergeant Wheeler, Corporal Chamette, Privates Gutfreund, McCurdy, Staboti, Currie, MacMillan, Jorgensen, Masters and Chiha. All veterans; all skilled in the tools of their trade—carbine, pistol and saber.

He led the way on foot down from the ridge on which the post squatted, following the dry wash to where the canyon met its smaller branch. There was a faint trace of gray in the east as they plodded up the smaller canyon.

It was rough. The floor was gouged by the tumbling of rocks during one of the infrequent flash storms of that area. Here and there undermined sections of the almost sheer walls had collapsed to form almost impassable barriers. The jumbled rock was thick with ocotillo, Spanish bayonet, brittle bush and jumping cholla.

They crashed through thickets of catclaw and mesquite, before at last the detail was halted for a breather. Wallace went on ahead with Sergeant Wheeler in the slowly growing light.

The canyon widened. On either hand were low ridges, capped with fallen rock. Between the ridges was a gap not more than fifty feet wide, a natural gateway. To their left, high above them, was the ridge that formed the barrier between the two canyons. Wallace looked up at the ridge.

"We're about even with the fort now," he said, "This looks like the place, Sergeant."

Wheeler nodded. "Anyone coming through here has to pass through that gap."

Wallace pointed to the low ridge on the right. "There is your position. Take MacMillan, Jorgensen, Masters and Chiha. I'll take the left with Corporal Chamette and the others. Let's go!"

THE eastern sky was light when his men took up their positions, placing rocks to form barricades, but not changing the natural features of the terrain enough to make an Apache suspicious. Leaving his men in charge of Corporal Chamette, the lieutenant climbed up the canyon wall. It was hard going. He ripped the knees out of his breeches and gouged a hole in his left forearm, but at last pulled himself up over the edge and walked over to where he could see the junction of the two canyons and the old post.

The post buildings looked like a handful of children's blocks placed on the barren earth. Smoke wreathed up from several chimneys. Horses and mules were

in the new corral. Men passed back and forth, completing the final details.

Wallace unslung his field-glasses and studied the fort. The dummies were all in position and from a distance looked real enough. Second Lieutenant Barnard was making a last-minute inspection. The shavetail was doing a good job. Wallace wondered how much fear was covered up by the young officer's calm appearance.

At the canyon entrance there was no sign of life. The sky now showed a faint trace of pink. Suddenly, as though conjured from the earth itself, a horseman appeared. An Apache! There was no mistaking the thick mane of hair, the headband and the thigh-length, button-toed desert moccasins.

He rode forward swiftly, then suddenly drew up his horse, staring at Fort McLeod in unbelief. Swiftly he turned his mount and disappeared in the brush.

Twenty minutes drifted past. Wallace could almost believe the Apache had been a figment of his imagination. Then he saw a dozen bucks ride out of the brush and begin to work their way slowly toward the fort.

The lieutenant cursed as he studied the warriors through the field-glasses. Some of them wore parts of troopers' uniforms—shirts, breeches and brass belt buckles. One wore a campaign hat, stained with blood. Service carbines were held across naked thighs. Gadoa had been having his victories.

A squat buck in the lead who dismounted and trotted forward wore a headdress of deerskin, and Wallace knew there was no mistaking Gadoa. The Apache was known for that headdress, made of the skin of a strangled fawn and blessed by Na-acha, a famous *diyi*, or medicine man, of the tribe. His cruel face was daubed across the nose with parallel stripes of white bottom clay.

Gadoa slid into a gully and lay still, watching the fort.

The canyon was now filled with clear light. The sun was tipping the eastern ranges. Wallace looked down on the fort. Barnard had his theatricals already started. Men passed him from one building to another. The rising sun flashed on a trumpet as Trumpeter Faber raised it to his lips and played First Call. The brassy notes filed across the morning quiet and died away down the canyon.

Troopers appeared, walked across the parade ground and then disappeared into one building, slipped out through the back, reentered another building through the back and appeared at the front. Even Colin had to look twice to make sure he was not seeing more than nine men. A mule hee-hawed from the corral. Smoke rose steadily from the chimney over the old mess hall.

Gadoa lay there for at least half an hour. The sun had begun to warm Wallace's back when at last the Apache chief arose and went back to his men. A horseman dusted off to the east. In ten minutes a long file of Apaches appeared in the canyon mouth. Lieutenant Wallace counted them. There were eighty. Gadoa had suffered in his raids to the north. Filthy bandages showed on arms and legs.

As the Apache led his men forward toward the junction of the two canyons, Wallace wondered if Rezin Barnard had seen them. Sweat began to trickle clammily down Wallace's sides, soaking his shirt as he suddenly realized how much he liked the young shavetail.

His throat dried up as the file of Apaches neared the junction. If Gadoa struck the fort the chances of Wallace getting his men up over the rock barrier between the two canyons in time to help Barnard would be highly improbable. If Gadoa was out there, he could wipe out Wallace and his men at his leisure.

COLIN Wallace closed his eyes as Gadoa halted his horse and held up an arm. For a moment he prayed. When he opened them again Gadoa was still sitting his horse, looking at the distant fort. Suddenly he turned his horse and led the way into the smaller canyon.

Wallace cased his glasses and crawled

back to the edge of the smaller canyon. Sergeant Wheeler looked at him as he slid over the edge, took off his hat and waved it in circles. The thin line of troopers behind the rock barricades sank down lower. Carbine barrels were thrust between rocks.

Wallace worked his way carefully down the steep slope so as not to start a slide or raise any dust. He dropped from the last shelf of the canyon wall and crawled up beside Corporal Chamette.

"They're coming," he said quietly.

Chamette shifted his chew and drew his Colt. He turned the cylinder and placed it on a flat rock. He looked down the line.

"This is for record—it goes on the payroll," he said softly.

Sergeant Wheeler raised his head, then dropped it quickly. He glanced across the gap at the lieutenant and nodded. The wind picked up the sound of hooves, covered with rawhide, tapping against rock. Wallace slid his carbine forward and cocked it.

Suddenly a hawk which had been circling silently overhead banked and sailed off down the wind. Eyes narrowed along the barricade. Chews were shifted. Hands tightened on carbine stocks. Tension took over.

The Apaches appeared so abruptly that it was a little startling. Gadoa was a hundred yards behind three scouts who eyed every bush and rock as though it marked a battery of artillery. Apaches dislike low ground and hate surprise.

Wallace thought, It's the only thing they do fear, so we'll build up that fear today.

He sighted on the broad chest of Gadoa. Closer and closer the red raiders came. Their three scouts entered the gap.

Wallace thought, Let them get through, to draw Gadoa closer.

The lieutenant took up the trigger slack. Suddenly he squeezed off. All down the line Springfields cracked. Smoke billowed and swirled. Gadoa shrieked and waved his men back. Just as Wallace had fired the Apache had moved.

Half a dozen warriors and horses lay in a tangled mess behind the chief. Blood trickled down his face.

Carbine breeches were flipped open. Hot brass hulls tinkled on the hard earth. Breech mechanisms were slammed home on fresh cartridges. Carbines blasted again into the smoke and dust.

The three scouts were shrieking in rage as they forced their horses at the rear of the troopers' position. Wallace's shot broke the jaw of one of them. His second sent another down under his thrashing pony. Corporal Chamette sent a slug plowing through the naked chest of the third.

The narrow canyon was filled with smoke and dust. Carbines rattled incessantly.

"Hold your pistols for a rush!" roared Lieutenant Wallace as the Apaches dropped back out of sight.

The smoke drifted off. The ground was littered with dead and dying warriors and horses. Wallace spat brassily as he reloaded.

Sergeant Wheeler yelled across to him, "No casualties, sir!"

The first red rush came afoot. The Apaches had spread out, skirting the sides of the canyon, darting from cover to cover. Trooper Chiha died with a slug through the top of his head and as his killer reloaded Corporal Chamette dropped him with a bullet through the face. Trooper MacMillan cursed as his forearm was shattered.

Slugs whined through the canyon.

Smoke puffed up from amongst the rocks and brush. A horse screamed insistently until Wheeler silenced it with a shot. Then suddenly the canyon was filled with the slap of hard leather on rock. A score of bucks broke from cover and raced for the barricade.

Carbines blasted half of them. Five reached the rocks and clawed their way up. Sergeant Wheeler and his two troopers met them chest to chest and drove them down the slope. A knot of Apaches dashed at Wallace's men. Carbines chewed into them, then Colts cracked, spinning

the racing bucks back down the slope. But Trooper Currie died with a cast knife through his throat.

Then all was quiet again except for the moans of Trooper MacMillan.

WALLACE looked down the line as he reloaded his Colt. Two men killed, one badly wounded. Chamette raised his head.

"Here they come again, sir! They're getting desperate now!"

Again the warriors rushed the barricade. This time they reached the top. Wallace fired his carbine and reversed it, catching a buck cleanly alongside the skull with the sound of a dropped melon. He stepped across the body to drive the steel-shod butt of his carbine into the face of a young brave. Chamette dropped two warriors with his Colt and went thrashing to the ground with another, fighting for a knife.

Chamette went under, gripped the blade with his hand when it was an inch from his throat. He threw the warrior back as Staboti blasted the Apache's skull with a shot from his Colt. Blood flew from Chamette's hand as he snatched up his revolver. Gutfreund went down with a shotgun blast against his side. His snap shot whirled a warrior about in time for McCurdy to kick the Apache over the barricade.

Wallace shook the loads from his Colt. Sergeant Wheeler drove in at the flank of three warriors with his two troopers, and when the fight was over the three Apaches were dead and Trooper Masters lay quietly gripping a broken leg. And once again there was silence in the canyon.

Colin swiftly bandaged Chamette's hand as McCurdy took care of Gutfreund. Sergeant Wheeler crawled to the edge of the gap. His mouth was bleeding. The lieutenant looked up at him. Wheeler waved a hand.

"We can't take another one like that, sir."

McCurdy grinned. "I'd like that three-day pass now, sir."

"Shud up!" said Gutfreund. "You must always play the fool!"

Chamette raised his bandaged hand. "Thanks, sir. Gadoa has taken a beating, sir."

"Gadoa is still alive, Chamette. He'll lead them on as long as he can walk or ride."

Staboti raised his head. "There's something doing over there, Lieutenant!"

A low chant broke out from down the canyon. Tired eyes turned toward each other behind the rocks.

"The *heshke!*" called Wheeler. "The wild killing craze is being worked up! We stop them now or they go right over us!"

The rush came on horses this time. The frantic mounts driven at the rocks by their shrieking riders were guided by the knees while lances were held high overhead in both hands. The excited ponies poured in a wave at the low ridge. Carbine fire spilled some of them beneath the pounding hooves of the others. Smoke swirled about the troopers. Then the Apaches drew back.

Gadoa rallied his men, shaking his long lance and shouting in slurring Apache.

"Hold your fire!" called Wallace.

Gadoa pointed his lance at the troopers and whooped. The line moved forward. Suddenly the brassy notes of a cavalry C trumpet echoed in the canyon. Beyond the Apaches appeared a knot of troopers, sabers thrust forward and mounts hammering toward the rear of the warriors. The troopers smashed into the startled bucks.

Wallace had a momentary glimpse of Lieutenant Rezin Barnard, standing high in his stirrups, slashing with his saber and cursing like a drunken teamster.

"Fire!" roared Wallace.

Carbines blasted the front rank of warriors. Wallace leaped to his feet, drew his Colt, and plunged down the slope for Gadoa who was fighting his excited mount. Gadoa shrieked, thrust hard with his lance. The point tore through Wallace's shirt beneath his left armpit, throwing him backward, pinning him on the ground.

He fired his Colt point-blank. Gadoa's

face disappeared from the smash of the heavy slug. Wallace's men ran down the slope. Colts crackled. Barnard's men tore into the panicked braves. For five minutes there was a wild mêlée of troopers and Apaches in a hell of cracking guns and flashing blades, then suddenly it was all over.

SERGEANT WHEELER, his shirt ripped from his blood-smeared chest, herded a group of sullen braves into a gully. Troopers dropped where they had fought. Lieutenant Colin Wallace got unsteadily to his feet and walked to Rezin Barnard.

"You must have been reading history books," he said slowly. "For you came in the nick of time, as all heroes do."

The second lieutenant finished knotting a filthy bandanna about his left wrist with his teeth, and wiped his mouth.

"We got tired of sitting up in that damned hole of a fort," he said. "Heard the shooting and figured we'd better take a hand. Besides, we didn't want *you* grabbing all the credit."

"Don't you know saber charges are not considered quite the thing in fighting Apaches, Mr. Barnard?"

Rezin Barnard looked about at the bodies of the raiders. "It worked."

Wallace grinned, took out his chewing tobacco, and offered it. "Chew?" he asked.

For a moment the shavetail hesitated, then he took it, biting off a big chew. "Thanks. Don't mind if I do."

Later as Barnard and his men herded the Apaches toward the mouth of the canyon, Sergeant Wheeler came up to Wallace. He eyed Barnard. The shavetail spat a stream of brown and shoved a warrior forward with his foot.

"He'll do, sir," Wheeler said.

Wallace nodded. "He's learned not to look back for help." He rubbed his lean jaw. "There was luck with us this day, Sergeant."

Wheeler shook his head. "Luck? No, sir. We pulled a bluff, right enough, but it was guts that did the job!"

WHAT'S A HORSE WORTH?

IN THE old days many a man literally rode a fifty-dollar saddle on a ten-dollar horse. Today renderers are busy buying horses for two dollars, and you can still buy a riding horse for ten dollars.

However, if you want to spend a little more money for your horse, you can do it, as evidenced by the classified section of one of the horsmen's magazines. For instance, here are some of the animals offered for sale, along with their prices and other information about them:

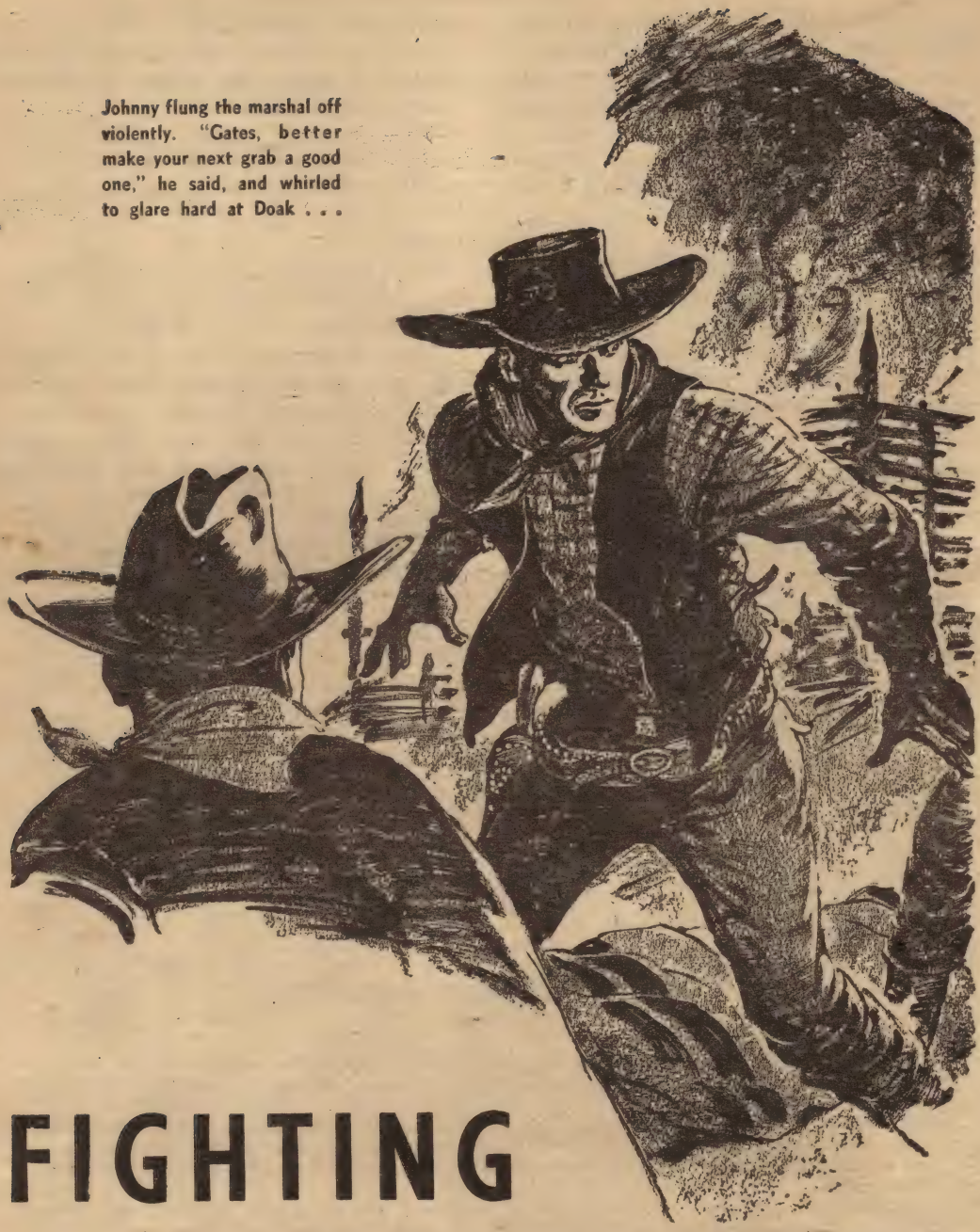
A man called to the Army offers these "sacrifice" prices; a gray Arabian stud colt, $350.00; a three-year-old gray filly $750.00, and a six-year-old brood mare at $750.00. Another man wants to sacrifice his Palomino parade gelding along with his silver mounted saddle for $3000.00.

If you want to hand raise a colt, you might like this buy: Classic gray registered Arab colt, best blood lines, gentle, drinks gallon milk daily, $500.00.

If you are going to buy a horse for the womenfolk, maybe you'd better pass the following one up, unless you've got a mother-in-law expecting a present: "Will sell Arabian stallion. Well broken, mannered, partly trained. Turns on hind feet and backs by use of legs and body without reins; is very fast. Desert raised and snorty. Not safe for lady or amateur. Needs and can stand lots of riding. Price $500.000."

—Allan K. Echols

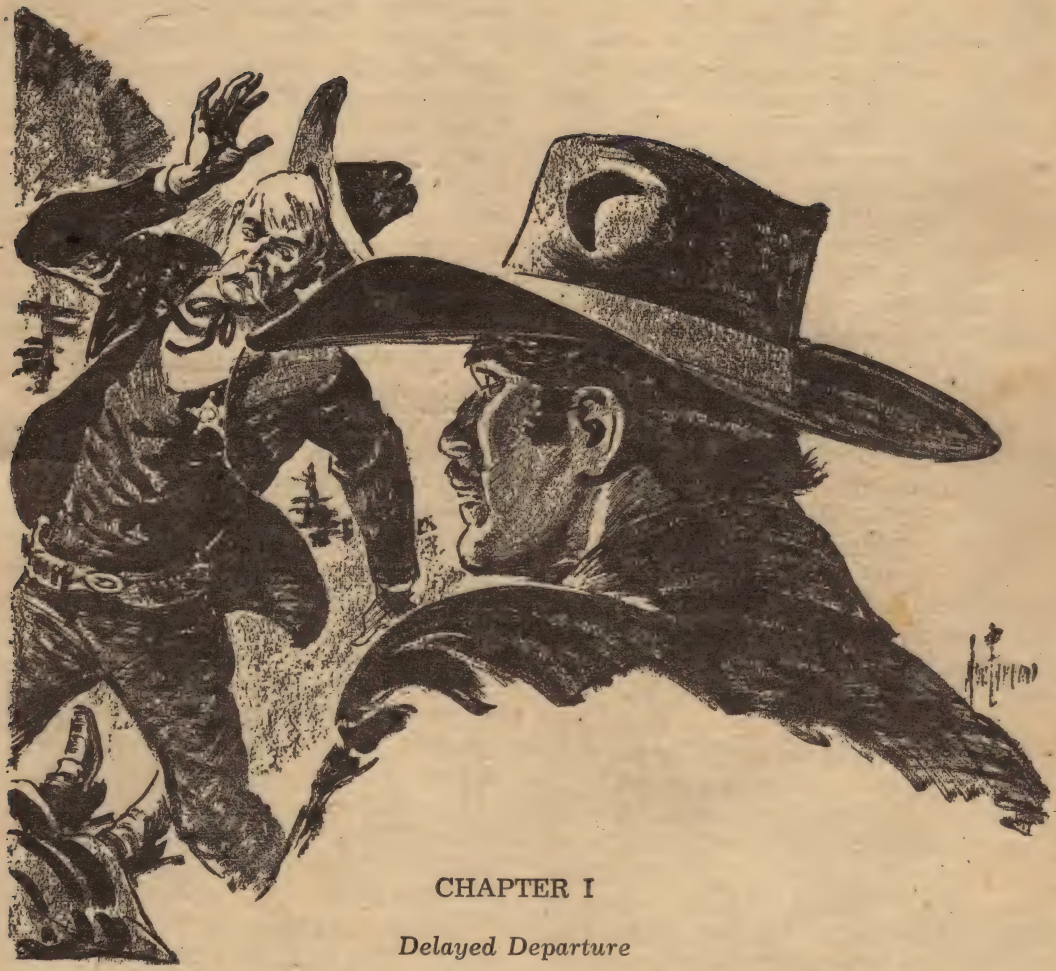
Johnny flung the marshal off violently. "Gates, better make your next grab a good one," he said, and whirled to glare hard at Doak . . .



FIGHTING FIDDLEFOOT

a novelet by **W. J. REYNOLDS**

Johnny Hicks was all set to push along this dried-up range—till somebody killed his partner and tried to fit Johnny himself with a harp



CHAPTER I

Delayed Departure

JOHNNY HICKS mounted his sorrel saddler at the pole corral and rode to the two-room log house. He hipped in the saddle and looked at old Muncie Bill in the doorway. Bill was jumping him for wanting to leave the MJ. He was a damn fine partner. Johnny wished Bill was coming along. They'd had some mighty fine times together before they went loco and bought this pore-jo ranch in Arizona's brush.

"Heck, Bill," Johnny said as he reined at the door. "Saddle up and come along. We ain't rich with two hundred head of bone-and-hide cows, and a dried-up ranch. Let the scorpions have it!"

Muncie Bill's faded eyes smiled at Johnny from his wrinkled face. "Not me, Johnny. I got rid of the fiddlefoot a long spell back. I'll fight them scorpions to a standstill. I'm home. Besides, it'll rain some time. Always has."

Johnny looked around at the brush and rock hemming the place, and shook his head. "It'll be a humdinger of a fight, Bill. You're welcome to my half."

"Sure, son. I felt like you feel for a long time. You light out and look over the hill some more and get rid of the itch in your foot. I'll stay and work on this place. Just remember this—when you take a notion to come back your half of it will be right here for you. My part, too, when it comes my time. Take care of yourself, Johnny."

"All right, Bill. So long."

"So long, Johnny."

Johnny nudged his horse into motion and rode down the broadening canyon under the scorching noonday sun. Dust, powder-fine, rose around him and soon he was as white with it as the brush and boulders he passed, and the puny, brittle dry sprigs of grass.

The canyon fanned into a larger valley and Johnny left the road and cut across the valley, threading his way through familiar clumps of brush and scattered, house-sized boulders. This was the eastern edge of the MJ, and ordinarily, there was fair grazing here. But it was gone now, along with the water holes.

JOHNNY urged the sorrel up the sloping side of the valley to a more abrupt drop from the upper rim, and as he made this cooler trail, he glanced backward then stopped the sorrel for a breather. For the last weeks he'd been anxious to make the break, to bid this barren land good-by, but now there was regret in him, an unexplained reluctance to leave. Was the old fiddlefoot urge dying in Johnny Hicks as it had in Muncie Bill?

Johnny jerked his shoulders impatiently and urged the sorrel on again. To hell with it! Muncie Bill could have his half of the MJ. Johnny Hicks was on the road. He still had the knack of picking the right horse in a race, and of filling a good poker hand. He'd make out, and sink his teeth in a good steak regular. Muncie Bill could have the sowbelly and beans.

Now that he'd made the break he lacked only Tina Reed's consent to make it all he could hope for. If he could get her to say "Yes", then Mr. and Mrs. Johnny Hicks would live off the top of the heap.

There was an uneasy feeling in Johnny about Tina. She wasn't going to like his leaving the ranch, and he'd have to do some tall talking to bring her around. Tina wanted kids and flower beds and a house of her own. Well, heck, he'd just have to talk fast and convince her.

Johnny pulled the sorrel up instantly when it tossed its head, and looked toward the trail down the valley slope. He reached forward to stifle a whicker, and his gray eyes, suddenly alert, scanned the valley below. Then he slid off his horse and held the bit, his other hand on the sorrel's soft nose. Three riders were down below him, sitting their horses, talking.

Johnny pushed the sorrel behind a clump of brush and gave the men down the slope his hard attention. That square-set black hat and solid head of one rider made him unmistakable. The second man was short and thickset and from the distance, Johnny couldn't place him. But the third man sent a tingle up his back. Even from here he could see the shaggy red hair beneath the flat-crowned hat.

A comment of old Muncie Bill's ran through Johnny's head— "Big Yurkeat is, big as a barn door, red-headed and mostly dirty as a hog wallow." And that third man down there was Yurkeat, Border killer, raider and smuggler.

Yurkeat and his man were talking right friendly like with Bert Doak. Mr. Bert Doak, the town of Dry Creek's most respected citizen, the owner of the livery, a grocery store, and a stockholder in the bank. He owned a ranch, too, and was Johnny Hicks's rival for Tina Reed.

Doak reached under his coat, brought out a bag, and passed it to Yurkeat. The raider took it, dumped the contents into his hat and counted those contents back into the bag. Gold, and a right respectable sum, too! The big outlaw nodded and made a short gesture with his hand. Doak turned his horse and loped away, back

toward Dry Creek. Yurkeat and his man sat there for five minutes, looking after Doak. Then they turned and rode back down the valley toward the Border.

Johnny Hicks cursed softly, not moving for another ten minutes. His opinion of Bert Doak always had been low enough, but he hadn't considered him as consorting with outlaws. Now what the blinking hell was Doak giving Yurkeat money for? They'd been on MJ property. Could it have anything to do with Johnny Hicks?

Johnny thought this over as he rolled and lighted a cigarette. It could hardly affect him or Muncie Bill. The MJ was on its last legs and the spread's two hundred nearly starved cows weren't worth stealing. Hell, they wouldn't bring Yurkeat five dollars a head on the night market. Not worth his trouble. No, it must be some shady, money-making scheme that interested Bert Doak, and did not concern Johnny Hicks.

HE MOUNTED and rode on toward Dry Creek. His eyes picked up the feather of dust made by Bert Doak's horse, and saw that it was angling north. Bert was aiming for his two-bit ranch three miles out of town. He didn't want the town folks to see him riding in from this direction.

"The damn crawler!" Johnny swore.

His scowl grew blacker as he rode on, thinking hard. It had even seemed lately that Bert Doak had the inside track with Tina. Doak was a steady man, getting ahead fast now with his town business and his recently acquired ranch. Doak, with his solid qualities, would be a real catch for Tina, so the town biddies claimed.

The town biddies claimed a lot more. They said that Doak was far better husband material than Johnny Hicks. Oh, Johnny was a likable rapscallion, and all that, but he was too itchy-footed for a husband. Johnny still liked the bright lights and the slap of cards and his whisky. Look at Bert's property, then look at that desert ranch that Johnny Hicks owned with that old desert rat, Muncie Bill!

"Nuts!" Johnny growled, and scowled at the faint feather of dust, almost invisible. "I wonder what that damn horse killer was up to with Yurkeat?"

Squinting his eyes against the dust that was kicked up by the sorrel's hoofs, he built himself another cigarette. The hell of it was, he couldn't even use this new knowledge he had of Doak against him. Nobody would believe him. They'd put it down to jealousy and that would just about ruin his chances with Tina.

Johnny squirmed at the bare thought of getting a cold look down Tina's pert little nose. To hell with it! He'd keep his mouth shut and let others find out like he had. Even Will Cates, the Dry Creek marshal. Will was a good man but he liked to talk, and to tell him would be the same as telling it in the Cowboy's Rest. Besides, Doak would deny it, and Will would believe him. Then Johnny Hicks would be forced to shoot a bullethole in Doak's shirt, and Dry Creek townsmen would hang Johnny Hicks.

Anyway, he was leaving here. Folks would find out about Doak in good time. If Tina went with him, Johnny, it wouldn't matter any more, and if she didn't the less bad she knew of Doak the better.

Johnny rode into Dry Creek at midafternoon and dismounted at the rail of the Cowboy's Rest. A grinning Mexican kid stood watching him, and Johnny tossed him a quarter. "Take my horse to the livery and tell them to feed and water him, amigo." The youngster snatched the coin, took the sorrel's reins, and trotted down the street with him.

Johnny looked toward Tina Reed's dress shop and his grin faded. Bert Doak's sweaty horse stood head down at the rail, dust, soaked by sweat, making dried cakes on its coat, Johnny turned to the saloon and slapped open the batwing doors. He'd see Tina when that scorpion-eyed character was gone.

He thought wryly as he went inside, Maybe he'll think of his horse before midnight.

Moonhead Bates, behind the bar, grinned at Johnny. "Boy, have you took

up lip exercises or was you singing?"

Good humor returned to Johnny Hicks. "Mind your own business and shove me a tall one," he said.

Moonhead drew a beer and passed it to Johnny. "I remember when you wanted your drinks out of a thick-set bottle," he said.

"Maybe I will again," Johnny said. "I'm heading for the other side of the hill right now."

"'Bout time you left that scorpion ranch out there." Moonhead jerked his head toward a rear table where four of the six men in the barroom sat. "They're making up a game. Want in?" Moonhead pointed at Johnny as one of the poker players, a townsman, looked up.

THE townsman called, "Come and sit in, Johnny."

"Why not?" Johnny said. He finished his glass of beer, waited for Moonhead to refill it, then walked back to the table. "I got ten dollars and a hundred-dollar horse."

"You won't have long, friend," one of the other two men—drummers—said.

The other drummer looked at the townsmen. "Any of you know this horse?" He looked quietly at Johnny. "No offense, friend."

"I know it," Rudolph, the Dry Creek barber said. "He's worth it easy."

"Let's play then," the drummer said. "I always wanted a good horse."

"Don't bet that striped shirt on it," Johnny said. He sat down.

By dark, Johnny Hicks had won three hundred dollars, and at seven o'clock he was down to his last chip. The drummer with the striped shirt grinned at him, fondling the stacks of gold coins and chips lovingly.

"Cowboy, is that horse gentle enough for a drummer?"

"You ain't got him yet," Johnny said. He grinned back. "But you nearly have."

At ten o'clock Johnny had a thousand dollars in front of him, and the disgusted players threw in their hands. "I know when I've had enough," Rudolph said.

Johnny grinned widely at the drummer with the striped shirt this time. "It was a sorrel horse, friend, with white stockings and a blaze face."

"I hope he throws you in a cactus patch," the drummer growled.

Johnny laughed and pocketed his winnings. "Step up to the bar, gents. Drinks on me." He roared to the room, "Drinks!" and men scrambled for the bar.

He snatched a quick drink and tossed two cold coins on the bar. "I got an errand that's overdue," he said to Moonhead, and went out.

There was still a light in Tina's shop and Johnny went toward it, feeling a little guilty. But heck, he couldn't go in with Doak there. Tina would know that, for she was well aware of Johnny's dislike of the stolid Doak. But if luck was still running his way, Doak wouldn't matter any more.

Johnny knocked on the door, and Tina called, "Who is it?"

"Johnny."

She opened the door and said, "Come in, Johnny."

There was reserve in her voice and manner, the same holding back that Johnny had noticed before of late. He said lightly, "You're looking at a man of affluence. Let's see a smile."

Despite the lightness of his words, there was a shaky feeling inside him that Tina always put there. She was small, and compact, a usually warm and vibrant girl. But the dark eyes looked straight at him now with a strange expression, almost as if she were seeing him for the last time, and her smooth lips were too tight.

"You almost didn't make it, Johnny."

Johnny grinned. She'd seen the kid take his horse to the livery, maybe seen him ride in, too. "You had company," Johnny said. "I'm polite."

"Was it a good game, Johnny?"

He slapped his sagging pockets and they jangled richly. "Pretty good." He sniffed. "I smell coffee."

Tina sighed, and her eyes softened for a moment as she turned toward the back room where she lived. "Sit down, John-

ny. I'll get the coffee." She disappeared through the door and Johnny sat down, a slight frown on his brows as he looked after her.

Something was eating Tina for sure. He thought of Doak and the frown became a scowl. But he smiled again as she came back with the coffee pot and two cups. She poured the coffee and sat down across the table from Johnny.

She said, "I hear you're leaving, Johnny."

He looked at her over his cup. "Word gets around, don't it? Did Bert make an extra trip to tell you?"

HE KNEW Bert had when her cheeks stained. She said sharply, "As a matter of fact, Bert did, but he seemed upset over it. I wonder why."

"I'm wondering harder than you are," Johnny said, remembering Yurkeat. Abruptly he set his cup down and leaned across the table toward her. "Tina, come with me. We'll shake this flea-bitten town. New York, Frisco, New Orleans. All the high spots, honey. We can get married tomorrow!"

Her smile held a relief now, for plainly she had come to a decision. She stood up. "You really believe that, don't you, Johnny? Well, perhaps you can do it. But my answer is the same as it was the last time. No. I want a husband at the table at mealtimes. I want kids and a front porch to sweep. I want a home."

He stood up, too, and came around the table to her. "But, Tina, we—"

"No, Johnny. Good-by." She moved to the door.

He caught her and turned her around and kissed her roughly, then with longing and love, and she stiffened and fought him before she went soft against him. Her lips clung to his a breathless moment, then she wrenched free, and jerked open the door.

"I was going to tell you, Johnny," she said with only a trace of shakiness, "that I told Bert I would marry him."

Johnny stood outside in the darkness as the door was shut behind him. He was reaching for tobacco when he caught the movement across the street in the dark passageway between two buildings. He waited, watching as a man went toward the back alley down that dark passage. In the rear of one—Doan's Saddle Shop—was a lighted window, and as the man passed it, Johnny got a glimpse of the square-set hat. Bert Doak.

Anger was in Johnny Hicks as he crossed the street and walked down the board walk to the Cowboy's Rest and went in. Bert Doak was coming in the back way. He went to the bar, and Johnny moved up beside him. Moonhead started to say something as he glanced at Johnny, but when he looked again he just shoved a bottle and glass before him.

Johnny poured himself a drink and said, "Bert, can you afford to be drinking in public, and blowing your money in?"

Doak lifted his heavy head to stare at Johnny with hate in his black eyes. "Somebody is going to tend to you some time, Hicks, and you won't be so smart."

"I was born smart," Johnny said. "I can't help it."

"We ain't talking about the same kind of smart."

"Stay out of alleys when I can see you, Bert. I scare easy."

"Stay away from Tina," Doak said. "All the way away."

"I will now," Johnny said. He gave Doak a solid, temper-controlled stare. "You stay off the MJ, Bert. All the way away."

Doak spilled some of his drink and hate was a killing fury behind the quick panic in his eyes now. But it was gone instantly, and he snarled, "Make it plain, Hicks."

"You and your Border pards," Johnny said.

Doak hit him with the fist that held the glass of whisky. He hit Johnny full in the face and the whisky set his eyes on fire and blinded him. He ducked instinctively, moving aside, and that was all that saved him from Doak's knee, aimed square at his groin.

The blow numbed Johnny's leg, but he swung blindly, furiously, and felt the

shook in his arm as his fist hit solidly. Doak hit the bar, came off it, and slammed a big fist that almost broke Johnny's jaw. Johnny skidded with the blow and crashed over a table.

He wiped furiously at the whisky on his face and in his eyes, dimly seeing Doak coming for him as men around them yelled, "Fight! Fight!" Johnny came to his feet as a cowboy burst into the room yelling. His words froze Johnny and every man in the room.

"The MJ's been raided!" the cowboy bawled. "Muncie Bill's dead, and the place has been burned down!"

CHAPTER II

Threat and Challenge

MEN gathered around the sweating KC cowboy who had brought the news, and Moonhead shoved him a drink. He gulped the drink, and as Johnny shoved up beside him, Moonhead gave Johnny a wet rag to wipe his face and eyes.

"Jack," Johnny said, "did you say Muncie Bill was killed?"

"That's right, Johnny," the KC man said. "Me and Fergie were heading for the ranch and the feedbag when we saw the flames. And we heard a whole hatful of shots that spelled trouble. Fergie lit out after our boss, Buck Bannerman, and the boys and headed for your place. I didn't hear no more shots, but somebody was rounding up your cows. Half a dozen men. I sneaked up close enough to get a look, and when they cleared out, I went on. I found Bill in the yard. The house and barn was done burned down."

"You real sure Bill was dead, Jack?"

"Plumb sure, Johnny. I seen that before I went to see where them fellers went. They headed for the Border. I went back to stay with Bill till Bannerman got there with the boys. He left a man with Bill and sent me to hunt you and tell the marshal. They went on after the raiders."

"Did you get close enough to recognize any of them raiders?" Johnny asked.

The cowboy shook his head. "I'd seen a couple of them around Sabinal, down on the Border, but the feller giving the orders was big as a skinned mule. Wasn't much of a moon, but I'd say he was Yurkeat."

Johnny headed for the door, lips tight and hate and fury in his eyes. Other men came following him, and within a few minutes a dozen men rode out of town. Johnny glanced back once at the solid figure of Doak, riding in the rear ranks, then rode silently, his face set grimly.

They arrived at the MJ in the false dawn, and found a KC man with a lantern sitting near Muncie Bill's blanket-wrapped body. The ruins of the house and barn still smoldered, wisping smoke. Johnny swung down and moved over, gently lifting the blanket from Muncie Bill's face as the KC man held the lantern.

Johnny let the blanket down again and looked at the cowhand. "Where was he shot?"

The KC man said grimly, "All over, Johnny. He didn't know what hit him, I don't reckon. I been figuring on it and the way I get it, they set the barn afire and when Bill come out to look, they cut down on him. His gun was still in its holster."

Will Gates, the Dry Creek marshal, said, "How many men did Bannerman have?"

"Eight," the KC man said.

"What you think, Johnny?" Cates asked.

"We might as well wait word from Bannerman," Johnny said. "He's overhauled them by now, or they've got clean away. I ain't worried about the cows. . ."

An hour after sunup they carried the body of Muncie Bill to a knoll behind the burned house. "Bill liked it here," Johnny told them. "He watched the sun come up from here every day."

They were digging the grave when Buck Bannerman rode in with his crew. One

nursed a bloody arm and another was nipped in the saddle, grinning embarassedly.

"We come up to 'em at the Wind Devil Thickets, Johnny," Bannerman said. "But they were already through, and had riflemen stationed at the passages. Winged two of our boys, and wasn't no use trying to bull through. He had us where the hair was short. They'd been two hours across the Border before we could have got around them thickets."

"Thanks, Buck," Johnny said. "You done what you could. Like I said, I ain't worried over the cows anyhow. It's the men that got Muncie Bill I aim to meet up with." He looked grimly about. "I ought to've been here with Bill."

BANNERMAN said, "Don't blame yourself, Johnny. They'd have cut you both down just as easy." He fingered his drooping mustache. "What I can't figure is the reason for this raid. Them cows ain't worth the trouble. Near as we can figure it was Yurkeat, and it ain't like him to piddle with a handful of five-dollar cows. But Yurkeat is a mean man to cross. You or Bill wasn't in with Yurkeat, was you, Johnny? Did he have a grudge against you?"

"I didn't even know him," Johnny said. "I only seen him once, at a distance." His hot-eyed gaze moved to the stolid-faced Doak. "That was yesterday."

Men straightened, giving Johnny their full attention. Bannerman glanced from Johnny to Doak and back. "You want to go into that some more?" The rancher asked softly.

"On the way to town yesterday," Johnny said, "I saw three men in the brush just off the Dry Creek trail. One was a big, red-headed man I figured was Yurkeat, the man with him was a gunslinger, I reckon. The third man was Bert Doak." Johnny's words dropped into the silence with shocking clearness. "And Doak gave Yurkeat a bag of gold. Yurkeat counted it from his hat into the bag again, then Doak rode for town and Yurkeat and his man went toward the Border."

"Hicks," Doak said with studied calm, "I know you don't like me, that you hate me now that Tina has promised to marry me, but you don't have to tell lies like that on me."

"Johnny, what the hell?" Cates yelled. "Damn it, you know what you're saying? Just because you and Doak both wanted to marry Tina—"

Johnny shouldered Cates aside as the marshal confronted him, and strode over to Doak. The man's stolid expression did not change, except for the fury in his eyes.

Johnny demanded, "Why did you give Yurkeat a bag of gold, Doak? Was it to raid this place and kill me? You didn't know I was leaving town, and I heard you were upset when you did hear it. Were you worrying because you'd spent your gold for nothing, Doak?"

"You're crazy, Hicks!" Doak said. "I won't listen to any more of it." He turned away and Johnny leaped to wheel him around.

"You'll listen, damn you!" Johnny yelled, his voice thick with rage.

Cates ran up to grab Johnny, and Johnny flung the marshal off violently.

"Cates, you'd better make your next grab a good one, or I'll knock your damn thick head off!" He whirled to glare at Doak.

Doak said, "I was at my ranch. I can prove I was."

"By your renegade pards? You're a liar, Doak! You hired Yurkeat to raid the MJ!" Johnny leaped back, hand quivering over his gun. "Pull your gun, Doak!"

Men scattered from behind Doak but the man refused to lose his calm. "I won't fight you, Hicks," he said. "This ain't my business, and I ain't getting rung in on it." He lifted his hands over his head.

Rage suffused Johnny's face and his gun came into his hand and bellowed. Doak's right hand jerked half down as the bullet gouged his ribs, but he shot it up again.

"Pull that gun, Doak, before I kill you in your tracks!" Johnny's voice shook with his baffled rage.

Behind him, Johnny sensed movement,

and dodged. But he didn't go far or quick enough, and the rifle swung by Cates glanced off his head, bringing him to his knees, head wheeling. Someone grabbed his gun arm, hauling the arm upward and tore the gun from his weakened hand. Then men were holding him helpless on the ground.

"I'll settle with you later, Cates," Johnny gritted.

"You're a fool, Hicks!" Cates panted. "You want to be hung for murder? You heard Doak say he could prove he was at his ranch."

"Not to me," Johnny said. "Maybe to you—with a bought witness."

HE LAY there and saw Doak mount and ride for the Dry Creek trail. Several possemen mounted and followed him. When they were gone, the men holding Johnny let him up. He brushed at the dirt on his clothes, his head aching from that glancing blow.

Cates said, "I didn't figure you for a man to go off his head, Johnny. You were accusing Doak of hiring a man killer, and stealing cattle."

"You don't say!" Johnny snarled.

Cates' face got red and he glared at Johnny. "Don't you come gunning for Doak in Dry Creek, Hicks. I'll arrest you the minute you get to town. You sneak around and do it, and I'll see you hung! You stay plumb clear of town till you get your senses back. Hear me? I ain't fooling!" Cates handed Bannerman Johnny's gun, then mounted and rode away with the other townsmen.

When they had passed from sight, Bannerman said, "Now, Johnny, I ain't one to call you a liar so quick. I never cottoned to Doak, either. But did you really see him with Yurkeat?"

Johnny glared at Bannerman, then abruptly deflated. "I saw just what I told all of you," he said.

Bannerman tugged at his mustache. "It'd be plumb hard to prove, as you just found out. You'd sure have to prove it. But I believe you, son, and it means we got a snake in our midst. If raiding the MJ was his way of getting at you, then he might lay low a long spell. What you figure to do?"

"I aim to put a bullet in him," Johnny said. "What else?"

"That wouldn't help much, son, not if you hung over it. And I doubt if you could beat it out of him in public. People would interfere like they did awhile ago. And to get it out of Yurkeat would be nothing gained, unless you did it in public, and that ain't likely either. Even if you had a regiment of cavalry to go get him with."

"I don't hanker to get hung," Johnny said. "But Doak won't get away with it! Muncie Bill loved his place and he was a mighty fine partner. He was shot down like a dog, and somebody is going to hurt for it!"

"Come over to the KC for a while, Johnny," Bannerman said. "Till you sort of get your bearings."

"Thanks, Buck," Johnny said. "I might do that, but I'll hang around here for awhile. I might scare up something."

Bannerman handed Johnny his gun, then he and his men helped finish the job of burying Muncie Bill.

"Take care of yourself, son. Doak would like mighty well to have your mouth closed," Bannerman said, and with that he swung up on his horse and rode away, his men trailing him.

Johnny sat down on a rock and rolled a smoke. He thought of Doak brazenly facing him down with a hot bitterness. He'd been right in thinking yesterday he couldn't tell what he'd seen, that nobody would believe him. And it had done him more harm than good. Doak was too well dug in with his pious airs, and careful avoidance of shady characters. Johnny had shot his wad to no avail, and now nothing short of absolute proof would do.

Even though Johnny had escaped Doak's thrust, the man's purpose had been accomplished. Doak was engaged to Tina Reed, and Johnny Hicks was branded a jealous hothead, capable of accusing Dry Creek's most respected citizen of being an accomplice to murder!

"The damn sneaking son!" Johnny snarled.

He stood up, reloaded his gun, and shoved it in his holster. He hitched up his pants under the sagging weight of the gold he'd won, then absently fingered the coins. The money he had aimed to live high on, him and Tina.

His laugh was a bark that was broken off short. He rammed his hand into his pocket again and drew out a fistful of the gold. His eyes narrowed with the simmering idea. Gold had made Yurkeat murder and steal. Maybe it would make him talk!

BUT what would be the good? It still would be Johnny's word again against Doak's. But if he had Yurkeat here—

Capturing the outlaw in his stronghold would be out of the question. But if he could get Yurkeat here to Dry Creek, then his chances would be a hell of a lot better than they were now.

He shoved the gold back in his pocket thoughtfully. There must be some way to get two crooks together, especially two crooks with as high an opinion of their cleverness and invincibility as Doak and Yurkeat. Doak had got Yurkeat here for two hundred scrub cows, and some gold. If those cows had been fat, like some of the KC beef on watered canyons farther west, they'd have been well worth Yurkeat's time and trouble. If he could make Yurkeat think that Doak had put one over on him, was laughing at the dumb Border raider—

With a thin smile, Johnny Hicks went to catch and mount his sorrel. He sat a moment looking at Muncie Bill's grave, then he lifted a hand in silent farewell, and turned the sorrel toward the Border.

NEXT ISSUE

CANYON OF COURAGE

A Novelet of the Cavalry

By STEUART EMERY

CHAPTER III

Bandit Stronghold

JOHNNY HICKS rode into the town of Sabinal, the Border stronghold of Yurkeat, the next day at noon. He stabled the sorrel at the livery, and went to the biggest café in town and ordered steak and eggs. Afterward, he visited several stores and bought a new outfit, fancy and high-priced. He paid in gold from his heavy pockets.

As Johnny walked down the street toward the barber shop, sloe eyes watched him from under peaked hats and from behind curtained or latticed windows. He knew that already the word was out of the stranger with the gold-heavy pockets. When he went into the barber shop he was given instant service. He was barbered and shaved, then soaked himself in a bath. When he left the shop, he was resplendent in the new outfit from boots to hat, and his old cedar-handled .44 looked oddly out of place against all the new finery.

Swaggering into the nearest cantina he slapped a double eagle on the bar. "Whisky!" he yelled. "Step up gents and name your pleasure. The drinks are on the Alkali Kid! The kid's got gold in his pockets and more where that came from! Drink up, gents!"

Men came quickly to the bar, ragged Mexicans, others in tight legged trousers, and gunhung men with watchful eyes in hard faces. They stepped up and drank and nodded to the "Alkali Kid."

Johnny made the rounds of the cantinas, drank and set them up for the house, and yelled his pleasure and swung smiling girls to the string music. The center of attention, he had to drink more than he wanted, but with all his activity and the big meal, he held it well. Sweat drenched his new clothes as he loped about the dance floors.

But Johnny did not miss the alert, gun-

hung men who hovered on the rim of the crowd and followed him from saloon to saloon. Those men weren't drinking much. The conviction was in Johnny that they were Yurkeat's Number One boys, and the fact that they watched him told him that he was an unknown quantity to them. They had of course looked over the sorrel before now, and Johnny was glad that he had never marred the horse's hide with another brand, the sorrel having only a small Heart brand on his leg.

That his plans were going reasonably well removed some of the tension from Johnny Hicks, and, obviously well into his cups, he started bragging. He let all who cared to listen know he was a brush-jumper from who laid the chunk, that he was loaded with gold and whisky and there were more of both when this was all drunk up and squandered, and that his boss was right up ahead of the others.

As Johnny squalled at the bar, wiping sweat from his face, one of the alert-eyed gunmen eased up beside him, and Johnny did not miss the way the girl he'd just danced with lit a shuck. The gunman drank a whisky on Johnny and said, "You're on the town Alkali, Kid."

"I'm just getting started," Johnny said.

"That's a lot of gold you're toting, Kid. Why not let a pardner in on a good thing? Couldn't this boss of yours use another good man?"

"Nope," Johnny said. "He's got me and another man. He plays it close to his chest, but the hauls are mighty sweet. Too many crooks spoil the broth!" He laughed loudly and the gunman joined in with his mouth.

"Don't reckon your boss operates around here. I hear tell this is Yurkeat's country."

"You'd be mighty surprised then," Johnny sneered. "My boss just took a haul out of here that would bulge your eyes. Yurkeat! Hah!"

The gunman's eyes were hard and shiny. "What does that mean, Kid?"

"Hell, it means my boss can outsmart Yurkeat four ways from the ace! He just got through doing it!"

"Talk comes easy," the other man said. "How'd he do it?"

"You may be right," Johnny said cagily. "Let's have another drink."

THEY drank, and Johnny had started to turn away with the air of a man who had properly subdued his opponent when the man caught his arm. "Yurkeat ain't being outsmarted by any jackleg crook. You're talking through your new hat, Kid."

Johnny glared into the snake eyes. "The hell I am! Maybe you know what went on night before last, huh?"

The other man's eyes shone a little more. "Maybe. I hear there was a raid. A successful one."

"Yeah," Johnny sneered. "For a handful of gold and two hundred bone-rack cows worth maybe five dollars on the night market. Right."

The outlaw was all attention now. "So far, so good."

Johnny grinned drunkenly, letting the fellow see his preparation for the clincher. "But he didn't get the other two hundred and fifty. *Fat* ones! That's where my boss and me comes in. He got thirty dollars a head for 'em! And he wasn't stingy with the cut he give me and the other man." Johnny slapped his pockets.

"Where's your pardner?" the man asked unbelievingly.

"Hell," Johnny snorted, "he's respectable. He's home with his wife." He turned away again, and this time the fellow let him go.

Five minutes later, Johnny saw him riding out of town.

As an excuse to let up on his drinking, Johnny went to the livery and checked his horse, then ate another big meal. He stalled over it with several cups of black coffee and finally, with dusk, went back to the nearest saloon. He was on his first drink when the snake-eyed gunman and a thick-set man even meaner-looking, came up on either side of Johnny.

"Come have a drink at our bar, Kid," the snake-eyed gunman said. "We'll introduce you to a real looker of a gal, too."

"Is that right?" Johnny said. "Lead on, gents."

They left the bar and walked toward the end of town near the livery stable. As they passed the last saloon, Johnny slowed up.

"Say, we've passed the last cantina."

"Don't worry about it," the short, thickset man said.

"This place is in the brush," the other one informed.

"The hell it is!" Johnny snapped. "I'm going back."

The short man shoved the barrel of his gun in Johnny's back. "You're going with us, dead or otherwise."

Johnny stood still, for there was venom in that voice, the urge to kill. Johnny took a firm hold of the anger that rolled inside him. He had recognized this man—the one who had been with Yurkeat and Doak. Maybe that gun in Johnny's back had spat one of the bullets into Muncie Bill.

"What's the idea?" Johnny asked. "Robbery?"

"You'll find out," the short man said. "Move along. Your horse is with ours right ahead there by the 'dobe house."

Johnny's gun was removed from his holster, and the short gunman felt him for other weapons. Then at his order, Johnny mounted the sorrel. With the short man leading the horse and the snake-eyed gunman bringing up the rear, they rode into the brush.

They rode for an hour, winding through the chaparral. Finally they came to a small clearing with an adobe abutting the thicket, and a brush shelter for horses in a pole corral.

"Get down," the short gunman said. Johnny did, and the man ordered, "Inside. We ain't as stingy as you. We want you to meet our boss!"

Johnny went in with the two close on his heels. Yurkeat sat at a rough table, a bottle and glass before him. He motioned a hairy hand at the stool across from him. The short gunman shoved Johnny down on it and his two captors ranged behind him.

JOHNNY looked at Yurkeat sullenly, much as he believed the Alkali Kid would look with the wind and brag shoved down his throat. It helped hide the hate in his eyes.

"What the hell is this?" he asked.

"You know who I am, snotnose?" Yurkeat asked, yellow eyes glaring.

"From the descriptions floating around," Johnny said, "I'd say you was Yurkeat, the big wind along the Border!" He sneered, "You know who I am?"

Yurkeat reached across the table and his big, red-haired hand smacked across Johnny's mouth. The blow had the kick of a mule and had those men not been behind him, it would have slapped Johnny half across the room. He sat on the stool and wiped the blood off his mouth and glared back at Yurkeat. The big raider hit him again, and Johnny's attempted dodge was blocked by the two behind him. Yurkeat poured himself a drink and downed it leisurely while he waited for Johnny's eyes to uncross.

Finally he said, "That's to let you know I ain't fooling with no loud-mouthed kid. I'll ask the questions and you answer 'em. Pronto."

Johnny glowered at him but said nothing.

Yurkeat asked, "Who's this boss of yours?"

"You ought to know," Johnny snarled. "He hired you to raid a ranch!"

Yurkeat stared at him, and Johnny stared back. Yurkeat said, "Doak, huh? Kid, if you lie to me I'll stake you in a ant bed. Hear me?"

"I hear you," Johnny said. "And if I do answer straight? Ants anyhow?"

"You can go with a kick in your new pants," Yurkeat said. "How long's Doak been working here?"

It was a tricky question, and Johnny knew the answer could get him a bullet. But Doak had got ahead fast, and Yurkeat would know that. Johnny said, "This was his first cattle deal. But I been working for him a good long spell. On property deals."

It seemed to satisfy Yurkeat. The raid-

er said, "Strong-arm stuff, huh? You may be tough kid, but you talk too damn much."

"I'm ready to quit," Johnny said.

Yurkeat drummed on the table with his fingers, and Johnny concealed the satisfaction in him as he saw this working on the Border raider. Yurkeat's breath became heavier and suddenly he glared again at Johnny. "I get blamed for stealing two hundred head of scrubs and killing a man, and your smart boss gets two hundred and fifty prime steers. Is that it?"

"He's laughing," Johnny said. He added hastily, "I didn't say *I* was laughing!"

Yurkeat's eyes were aflame. "Go on and laugh, kid."

"I don't feel like it," Johnny said. "Nothing here's funny to me."

"It will be," Yurkeat said. "A man can laugh a lot for seven thousand dollars!" He laughed himself, a loud and shattering roar, then just as suddenly leaped to his feet, hurled the table end for end, and hauled Johnny to his feet by the new kerchief around his neck. "You ought to laugh, snotnose! You'll be lookin' for a new boss!" He hurled Johnny to the floor and grabbed his hat as he said to his men, "Get the horses. We're goin' for a ride."

Johnny got up off the floor and rolled a smoke. He tore two papers for effect, but rolled the third one.

Yurkeat said, "Shorty, you know where Doak lives?"

"Yeah, it's where I got hold of him the other time. You reckon I ought to grab a couple of more boys, boss, besides me and Snake?"

Yurkeat growled at Johnny, "Kid, how many men at Doak's place?"

"Just him and one man," Johnny said. "Usually, that is. He'd got two more that stay mostly on the range."

"We'll be enough," Yurkeat said. "I'm in a hurry."

When the sound of Snake coming with Yurkeat's horse was heard, Johnny was shoved outside.

Shorty said, "Mount up, bucko."

"I'll head back to town," Johnny said.

Shorty's cocked gun nudged Johnny's ear. "You'll head with us—hear me?"

"I hear you," Johnny said.

"Let's go," Yurkeat said.

CHAPTER IV

All Hills Are Alike

AS DAWN was lighting the eastern sky, Yurkeat sat his sweaty horse on a brushy knoll overlooking Bert Doak's ranch, and looked at the layout below. The house was an old log cabin with two small plank rooms added.

As the outlaw and his companion watched, smoke began coming from the chimney. A cowhand came out and went to the barn, then Doak came out and washed up at the bench against the back wall. He went back inside. The other man was forking hay.

"Looks like just the two here," Yurkeat said. "Shorty, take the kid and wait at the edge of the clearing for my signal. Snake, you take the man at the barn and bring him in. I'll take the cabin."

They tethered the horses in the brush, and advanced on foot, Johnny slightly ahead of Shorty whose gun was in his hand. At the rim of the brush, a hundred feet from the cabin, Shorty said, "All right, snotnose."

Johnny hunkered down to watch. He saw Snake make the barn without an alarm being given, then Yurkeat left the brush and walked boldly to the back door of the house. He stood there a moment listening, then looked toward the door.

Snake was leaning against the corner of the barn, and when the man with the fork of hay saw him, he stood there staring into Snake's gun without a word. Johnny could almost see his jaw working in astonishment.

Snake motioned with his gun and the man started toward the house, walking as though he had pins in his boots. Yurkeat motioned for Shorty and Johnny and

as they came toward the house, he opened the door and went inside.

Snake shoved his scared prisoner in through the doorway and Shorty, with Johnny, followed them inside. Yurkeat was in the center of the room looking at Doak who stood with a flapjack on a butcher knife, ready to turn the cake—His stolid face showed little surprise, but his eyes were wide.

"Get over by the stove, kid—and you feller—so we can watch all three of you," Yurkeat said.

Johnny and Doak's man, whose name was Kell, moved over beside the stove.

Yurkeat said, "Just a happy reunion, Doak." He jerked a thumb at Johnny. "Know that kid?"

Doak glared at Johnny, and Johnny said, "Howdy, Bert. Coffee fixing to boil over." He moved the big pot back a little to the rear of the stove. "They got onto us, Bert. Guess you'll have to cough up some do-re-mi!"

"What the hell is this?" Doak said. "Hicks, keep your Border pards off my ranch!" He shot a quick glance at Kell, who was staring at them with wide eyes.

"What's the matter, Bert?" Johnny asked innocently. "You mean Kell here ain't in on none of this easy money? He don't know about you?"

"I ought to—" Doak gripped the butcher knife, letting the flapjack fall. He glared furiously at Johnny, then at Yurkeat.

Yurkeat was watching with a thin smile, but his yellow eyes were hard, with a powerful man's anger at being taken in.

"You ought to've let Kell in on some of the easy money," Johnny said. "I figure he could run off other people's cows, and maybe shoot a man. Eh, Kell?"

"N-not me!" Kell hastily protested.

"Damn you, Hicks!" Doak snarled. "What are you up to? What'd you bring these people here for? Who are they?"

Johnny laughed, and Yurkeat said, his voice dangerously soft, "You knew me well enough the other day, Doak, when you hired me to raid a ranch and kill a man! Your memory that short? We know all about the sharp deal you put over, Doak. You gave me five hundred in gold and I was to have all the cows from the MJ. I've come for the rest of my money. For those other steers. Where is it?"

Doak stared at Yurkeat, then looked at Johnny and, with understanding, a mounting fury suffused his face with blood. "I don't know what you're talking about. Whatever wild story this damn fool Hicks has told you is a lie!"

JOHNNY was tight with strain, and he forcibly kept his eyes off the shotgun and rifle on the rack behind Shorty. He fiddled with the lid on the coffee pot, picking at the knob on the lid, ascertaining that it wasn't hinged, just set in its groove.

"Better quit stalling, Doak," Yurkeat said. "I ain't fooling. I'll gut-shoot you and find the money!"

"I ain't got no money," Doak snarled. "You got the MJ cows!" He turned a mottled face to Johnny. "And there's the damn man I wanted killed! Johnny Hicks!"

Johnny's hand, gripping the hot handle of the coffee pot, brought the pot around in a side swing, open end out. The scalding liquid curved in an arc, spattering Shorty and Snake and Yurkeat, to land in Doak's face. Shorty's gun had roared at Johnny's sudden move, but the bullet meant for Johnny tore a hole in the roof as Shorty tried to avoid the shot of coffee. Bellows of pain from them all nearly drowned out the sound of the gun. Then Snake's and Yurkeat's guns were hammering as the blinded men sought a target.

Johnny hit Shorty with his shoulder as he leaped past, knocking the short gunman down. Then Johnny was ripping the shotgun from the pegs, and bringing it around. He yanked a hammer and fired as Shorty came over on his elbows and slanted up his gun.

Shorty's bullet gouged a furrow under Johnny's arm, but then the shotgun bellowed, to erase the thick-set gunman's face, and Johnny was pulling the other hammer back.

Yurkeat's gun was roaring as he fired

into Doak's body, but the stolid Doak had launched himself at the Border man with the butcher knife jutting, and even with lead hammering into the body, he drove the eleven-inch blade to the handle in Yurkeat's ribs. Snake had his sight back enough to fire with purpose and he drove a shot at Kell as the man went headlong through the window.

Johnny heard Kell's boots making a staccato sound toward the barn as Snake whirled around, his eyes mean and hard, as he swung his gun. Johnny let him have the second barrel of the shotgun and Snake caromed back onto the table.

Johnny grabbed up Shorty's fallen gun, but even as he moved, he felt the shock of Doak's bullet in his hip. Johnny flipped up Shorty's gun, and shot him between the eyes.

For a moment Johnny Hicks looked at the carnage inside the cabin, but as he heard a scramble of hooves at the barn, he struggled to his feet and, despite his wounded hip, hobbled out the door to the yard. Kell was just coming through the gate bare-back, on a wild-eyed horse, heading for town.

"Hold up, Kell! "Johnny yelled as Kell raced for the brush. He saw that the spooked cowboy wasn't going to stop, and roared, "The fight's over. They're all dead!"

Kell flung Johnny a wild glance and drummed the horse's sides with his heels. Johnny lifted his gun and emptied the weapon under and in front of the horse. It threw out its front hooves, went scooting for the brush beyond the barn.

The horse loosened Kell by the stop, spilled him. Johnny hobbled up to him.

"Damn it," Johny said, "you can go to town, but there ain't no hurry!"

"What the hell happened, anyhow?" Kell asked, with more calm. "Damn if the place didn't just blow up. Sort of."

"Sort of is sure right," Johnny said. "You remember what you heard in there?"

"Hell," Kell said, "the way I thought I heard it, was that Doak hired Yurkeat to raid your MJ!"

"That's what he done," Johnny said. "You can catch another horse now and hike into town and tell Marshal Cates that. I'll wait here. . . ."

LATE in the evening, Johnny Hicks hobbled down the main street of Dry Creek to Tina Reed's dressmaking shop. Tina had hovered over him while Doc Hurley had bandaged his hip and assured him he had only a flesh wound. Then Tina had left again while Johnny repeated his story of Doak's hiring of Yurkeat to raid the MJ and kill the men there.

Now Johnny aimed to have a word with Tina. He went in the open door.

Tina was apparently busy, working on a dress, but Johnny could see that her motions were mostly wasted.

Johnny sniffed. "I smell coffee."

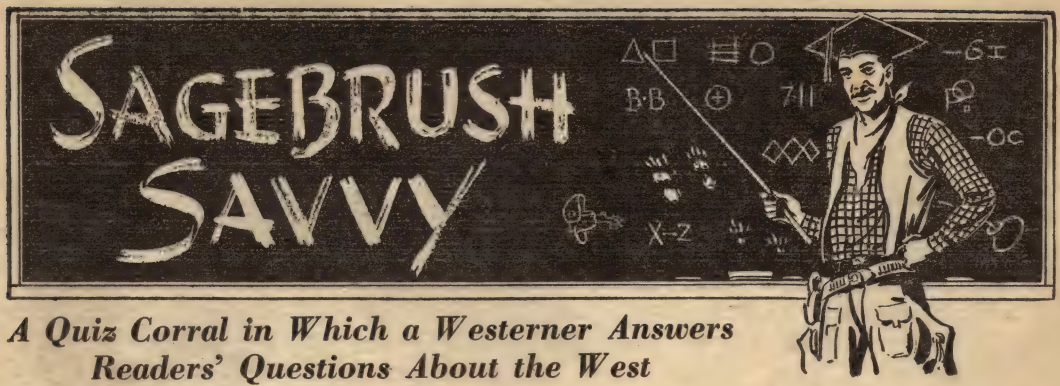
Tina jumped to her feet and faced him, her face stiff with her effort at control. "Johnny Hicks, I'll dump a whole pot of coffee on your thick head!" The anger came then and she glared at him. "Go on and saddle up, ride out for your look over the hill. Don't come pestering me!"

"I like the way you make coffee," Johnny said. He grinned at her, then the grin faded abruptly. There were a lot of things he liked about Tina; the way she made coffee was only a small part of it. He wanted Tina a lot worse than he wanted to look over the hill. Hills had a habit lately of looking a lot the same on both sides. He was apt to see Tina on all sides.

He stepped forward, his arms went out and pulled her to him, and he kissed her hard and possessively. All resistance left her, and she lay against him. "Oh, Johnny, why make it harder? Now that you've showed Bert up for what he really was, why don't you stay here at the Cowboy's Rest? The drinks will be free to a fiddlefoot!"

Johnny's hands were gentle on her arms. "I ain't a fiddlefoot any more. All at once I don't like saloons. I want to raise kids and cows. With you, Tina. Will you?"

Her arms were tight around his neck in answer. ● ● ●



A Quiz Corral in Which a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Can you tell me where I can buy a buckskin skirt and handmade cowboy boots?—Mrs. F.B.W. (Ark.)

A.—Western gals have got so much in the habit of wearing levis to ride or romp in that there's not much call for buckskin skirts these days, but a couple of outfits either still make them or would make one for you. No free advertising in this department but I'm always glad to supply their addresses and those of good bootmakers to any questioner by letter.

Q.—Which would you say is the best western state in which to fish for trout?—G.W.L. (Ill.)

A.—I'm liable to have New Mexico, Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, Utah, Washington, Oregon, Arizona and California on my neck, but I'll stick it out anyway and say, for plentiful stream fishing, Colorado.

Q.—Where can I buy a good, well trained western Quarter Horse, not too expensive?—Lee S. (Ind.)

A.—The west, southwest in particular, is full of reliable Quarter Horse breeders with hosses to sell, some purty expensive, some not. Write the Quarter Horse Journal, P.O. Box 2290, Amarillo, Tex. for a sample copy carrying horse-dealer ads.

Q.—I have read some place that Billy the Kid's mother was Mrs. Wm. Antrim and some place else that she was a Mrs. McCarthy. Which is right?—Ella J. (Tex.)

A.—The Kid's father, his mother's first husband, was Wm. H. Bonney. There is some disagreement among historians, however, as to whether she later married a man named Antrim or one named McCarthy or both. But according to recollections of oldtimers who knew the family at Silver City, N.M. (and that's the best kind of evidence), Billy the Kid's stepfather was "Uncle Billy" Antrim, a blacksmith.

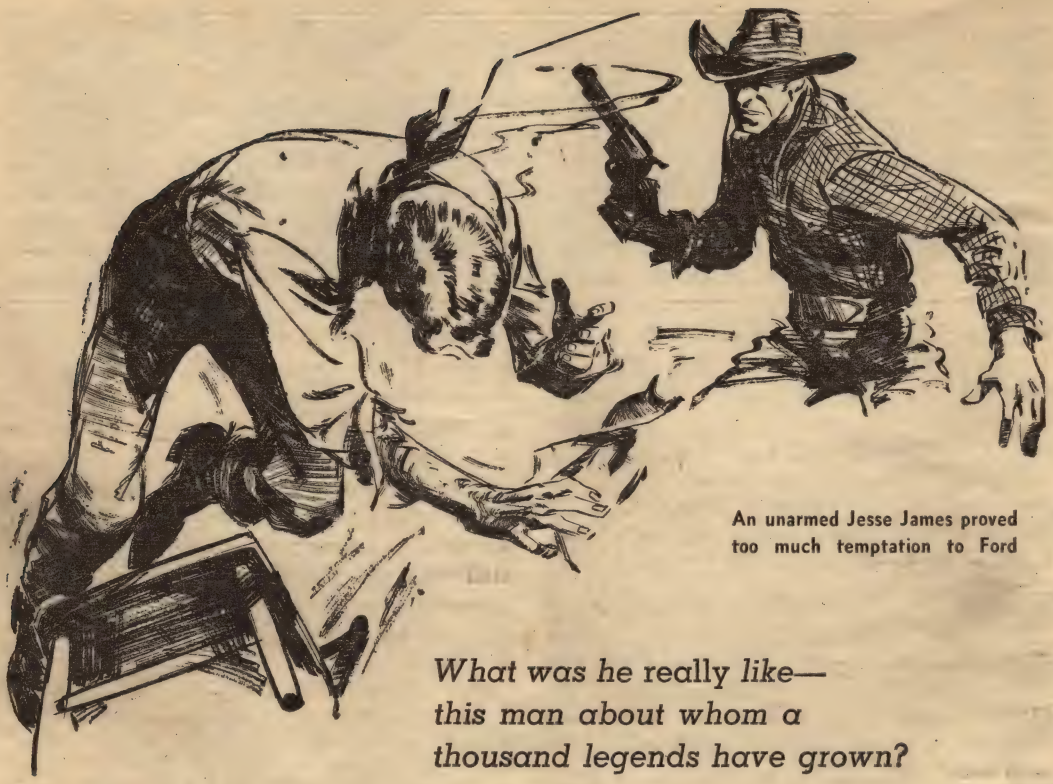
Q.—Is it true that wild burros are hunted as game out west?—W.H.G. (Maine).

A.—Wild burros have been shot as big game in some desert areas of California and Arizona, but there is a strong movement on foot to put a stop to it, led by Ardis Walker as head of the Death Valley Forty-Niners' Association. How successful the movement has been to date I don't know.

Q.—Why do cowboys wear big hats?—Dora McM. (N.Y.C.)

A.—Want me to write a book, huh? Briefly, Texas cowboys undoubtedly copied the big hat custom from the Mexican *vaqueros,* along with a good many tricks of the cowhand trade which they gradually changed and improved, just as they did the huge, unwieldy Mexican *sombreros.* Fairly wide brimmed hats had also been common in Kentucky and Tennessee where a good many of the first Texans came from, so it probably came purty natural. The cowboy hat never has been just a style, however. Its broad brim protects the wearer's eyes from sun glare and keeps rain from running down his neck. He can cup its brim to dip a drink with or even water his horse in its crown if need be. The oldtime cowboy's stetson, however, was rarely as big as some seen today at rodeos, where the *sombrero grande* is largely a matter of traditional western style.

—S. Omar Barker



An unarmed Jesse James proved too much temptation to Ford

What was he really like— this man about whom a thousand legends have grown?

JESSE JAMES— MYTH OR REALITY?

By SAM BRANT

THERE is so much lore and counter-lore about Jesse James today that it's hard to know whether to picture him as Henry Fonda, Robert Preston, John Barrymore Jr. or any one of a dozen other actors. Hollywood is always making a movie of another version of the nation's Number 1 outlaw, and there seem to be as many slants on the epochal badman as there were six-shooters in those days.

It's no wonder that people are somewhat confused about just what to believe about the notorious desperado.

A general impression exists that he was something of a Robin Hood who turned train bandit to avenge some knavery on the part of autocratic railroads. It is also generally believed that he was cruelly shot to death in the back. On the other hand, sometimes it does seem that Jesse was mixed up in some pretty cold-blooded affairs.

Just what should you believe?

Well, the cold and hard facts about the bandit from Missouri are these:

What started Jesse on his nefarious

career was not the railroads but the Civil War. Jesse was only 12 when the conflict broke out, but at 14 he'd joined the guerrilla band of William Clarke Quantrill, who had some 450 men under him. Supposedly, Quantrill was a Southern "soldier" doing his bit for the Confederate cause. But the Federal Government declared him an outlaw, and even the Confederacy didn't approve of all his sorties. He was headstrong and ruthless and some of his "raids" were little more than bloody piratical orgies. He probably reached some sort of peak with his Lawrence, Kansas, raid of April, 1863. He and his band shot down every male in sight and looted and sacked the town from one end to the other. Some 200 residents of the town were killed, and damage ran to $1,500,000.

When the war came to an end some three years later, there was much that was forgotten and forgiven, but the Lawrence massacre still rankled and Governor Crittenden of Kansas proclaimed that the men who had participated in the raid were still wanted as outlaws.

Jesse and his brother Frank, with several others who had participated in the raid, held a counsel and decided not to give themselves up. In fact, they decided to continue on in the same old groove.

HOW WOULD a modern psychiatrist view this turning point in Jesse's life today?

A lot of sentimental hogwash has been written about Jesse but the truth is this: Jesse did come from fine stock. His father, in fact, was a Baptist preacher. Mr. James died shortly after Jesse's birth, and when seven years later Mrs. James married again it was to another upright citizen, Dr. Reuben Samuel.

Whether Jesse's turn to crime can be laid in some measure to his fatherless early youth, or whether he was a product of his hectic times, or whether he just naturally had a predilection for doing bad, the fact remains that he was only 17 when he took his fateful step in the direction of out-and-out outlawry.

Jesse's gang came to be known as the James-Younger gang. In addition to Jesse, its members consisted of Frank, Jesse's older brother, and the Younger brothers, Cole, Bob, Jim and John, as well as a number of other individuals from time to time. They began by holding up stores, then graduated to banks, then to trains. Jesse generally acted as advance man, going into a town where a robbery was contemplated, taking in the lay of the land and figuring out the strategic details. Apparently, despite his youth, he was leader of the gang virtually from the outset. He was a lean, lithe young man, not bad looking.

Jesse was not only shrewd, but he exhibited the other qualifications it takes to be an outlaw leader—he was ruthless and cold-blooded. He thought nothing of tampering with rails in order to wreck an oncoming train so that he could loot it. There is just no telling how many deaths Jesse James was responsible for—but there's no doubt but that it was plenty.

The general citizenry of his time is often pictured as being sympathetic to James. This is not quite true. It was posses of citizens, fed up at the continual plundering and viciousness of the outlaw gang, that finally began to break it up, mainly by hunting and shooting down the bandits. At times the vigilante activity got so hot, that Jesse and Frank had to go all the way to Mexico to hole up.

But things did happen from time to time to turn people against some of the actions of the vigilantes. For instance, once, in their anxiety to get Jesse and Frank, a group of men shot up a house along the Missouri countryside, killing an eight-year-old child and wounding the mother. The James brothers weren't even there. A few days later, the leader of that posse was shot and killed. Everyone said that Jesse had avenged the child's death. And, in that bloody fashion, the Robin Hood legend began to attach itself to Jesse James.

Oddly enough, the feature of Jesse's life that you'd figure the movies would

"schmaltz up" the most is probably the one that comes closest to mirroring the truth—Jesse's personal life. He apparently was something of a model lover and husband, and he actually had climbed up on a chair to attend to a picture in his home on that fateful April 3, 1882.

IT WAS a warm day and Jesse had taken off his gunbelt and coat and was attending to some chores around the house.

This was in St. Joseph, Missouri, where Jesse, calling himself Sam Howard, lived with his doting wife and two small children. In his house at that time was a "boarder," Robert Ford, a young confidant of Jesse's. The reason for Ford's presence—and why a number of others dropped in to confer with "Sam Howard" from time to time—was that Jesse was plotting the robbery of the bank at Platte City, Missouri. A murder trial was getting underway there, and the crafty Jesse figured that the attention of everyone, including lawmen, focused on the trial, he'd have an excellent chance.

What actually caused Jesse's downfall, though, was not so much an over-devotion to domestic duty but something that had happened several days before. Jesse's train robberies had become so bold and frequent that the Governor of Missouri and the railroad people decided something had to be done, and held a conference. The result was a $30,000 reward offered for Jesse, dead or alive, to this day one of the largest rewards ever put up for a criminal in this country.

An unarmed Jesse, standing defenselessly on a chair with his back to him, proved too much of a temptation to Bob Ford. He pulled out a gun and fired twice.

At 33, as it must to all men, the end had come to Jesse James.

Had Jesse been killed in a fair fight, or had he been captured by the law or died a natural death, it is doubtful whether a good deal of glamour that has attached itself to him would have done so. But to have been shot down in so cowardly a manner practically made a martyr of him. At least one community where he hung out has discussed putting up a monument to him.

The line of the song, "The dirty little coward that shot Mr. Howard and laid Jesse James in his grave," pretty accurately reflects how most people felt about the happening. An outraged populace soon had Ford arrested. He was convicted of murder and sentenced to be hanged.

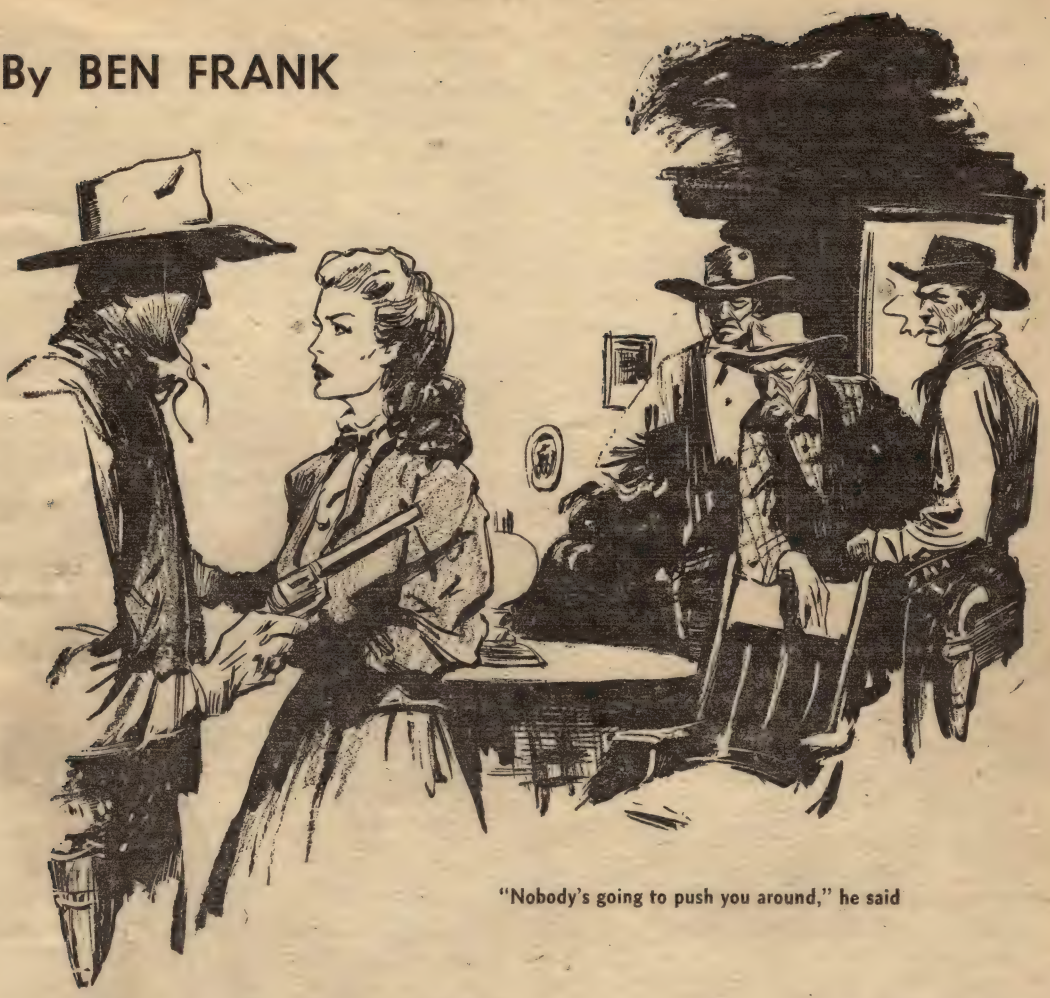
But the governor of Missouri, a man of his word, freed Ford and gave him the $30,000 reward money. He soon ran through the money, though, and took to making appearances on the stage, capitalizing of course on his notoriety as Jesse James' killer. Then he moved to a mining camp in Colorado, opened a dive and soon found himself feuding with Deputy Sheriff Kelly, supposedly over some woman. One day poetic justice came to "the dirty little coward who shot Mr. Howard." The deputy sheriff shot him down without any warning.

Deputy Kelly was given a life sentence for this, was freed a number of years later for good behavior, but was killed in Oklahoma when he resisted being arrested by an investigating lawman.

So far as is known, only one person who had any connection with Jesse's gang came to what might be called a good end. It was Frank James. Shortly after Jesse's death, Frank, broke and believing himself to be in a bad way with tuberculosis, gave himself up. He was indicted in connection with two killings growing out of a train robbery, and another death that was the result of a bank holdup. He was tried first for the bank holdup death but the case against him folded up when no one could identify him positively. The authorities then decided to turn him loose. He looked so bad physically that it was felt he wasn't long for this world.

But Frank, who had married the daughter of a well-to-do and respectable farmer from near Independence, Missouri, the home town of ex-President Truman, went to live with his in-laws and lived out an exemplary life to a ripe old age. ● ● ●

By BEN FRANK



"Nobody's going to push you around," he said

Charley Singer's FATE

IF ANYBODY had said to Charley Singer, "Charley, a man's life ain't nothing more nor less than a series of accidents he runs into from time to time —fate, you might call it," he would have tipped back his sandy head, opened his big mouth and laughed fit to bust his buttons.

Charley, who wasn't quite twenty-two, didn't believe in fate. No, sir! Hadn't he, a big-boned, lop-eared kid, took the bull by the horns five years ago and run away

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Charley liked to fell out of his saddle the day he found a beauteous girl in his favorite swimming hole—and that was only the beginning

from his ornery old uncle's Half-moon Ranch, with a pocketful of the old buzzard's money?

Wasn't he riding back to the Half-moon, following Bent Creek down out of the mountains, hating his uncle and his cousin like sin and determined to show them he had grown up tougher than a new boot? And didn't he have six one-hundred-dollar bills stuck into the pocket of his levis? He'd worked hard for that money, too.

No two ways about it, Charley believed a man could paddle his own canoe any direction he wanted to go. And right now, he was paddling back to his Uncle Jeb Singer's ranch. He aimed to wave that money under the old coot's thin nose and yell, "Figure it out, you tight-fisted old cuss—the three hundred I took with six per cent interest! Enough to pay for a bony, no-good horse and a worn-out saddle I took along, too."

Then while the oldster was still goggle-eyed and likely scared silly of his big-fisted, gun-packing nephew, Charley would tie into his bully of a cousin, Lark. He'd wham the daylights out of him to repay him for the times Lark had knocked him, Charley, around.

Lifting angry eyes, he gazed about. Five years—and he couldn't see any change in Half-moon Valley. Red rock bluffs on the north and south, walling it in. Mountains behind him, their snow crowns feeding Bent Creek. A ragged ridge of hills to the east, through which Bent Creek knifed its way out of the valley through a deep gorge.

Yep, everything was the same. Until he reached the old swimming hole—and then nothing was ever the same. For he'd come head-on against fate, even if he didn't realize it. This fate was in the form of a girl, her hair a shower of bright gold. She was having a swim in the clear, blue water.

CHARLEY liked to fell out of the saddle. As far back as he could remember, there'd never been a girl in Half-moon Valley. And likely never anywhere a girl so downright beautiful as this one.

She stood up suddenly, and she was wearing a white bathing suit that fit her like she'd been poured into it. He felt a great rush of blood through his head. Not that Charley Singer was the kind who blew a gasket every time he saw a pretty girl, but this one was something special.

He wondered who she was. Then he spied her horse tied to a scrubby pine.

Keeping hidden in the underbrush, he sneaked over on foot. The horse bore his uncle's brand—a half-moon. That reminded him of his mission. Face grim, he mounted and rode quietly away from the swimming hole. It would be just his luck to find his no-good Cousin Lark married to that girl.

"Dang Lark's ornery hide, anyway!" he growled.

In a half-hour he topped a hill and saw the Half-moon buildings. The house, the corrals. All the same—yet now somehow different.

That girl, he thought, has got me imagining things.

He rode directly for the house. But a movement in the bunkhouse door caught his eye, and he saw a squat, partly bald man step out into the sunlight, a rifle in his hands.

Charley knew then that things had really changed in Half-moon Valley. A slight chill fiddled along his spine. Since this gent looked about as friendly as a rattler, Charley had an idea it wouldn't be healthy to turn tail and run.

"Looking for somebody, cowboy?" the man asked harshly.

Charley decided to play it cagy, for there was no telling what he'd run into. Grinning, he slid to the ground, careful to keep his hand well away from his six-gun.

"Looking for a job—name's Charley Case," he said, figuring it might be smart to avoid the name of Singer.

"I'm the cook here," the man said. "Polk's the name."

Charley wanted to ask, "Where's old Jeb Singer?" But things didn't smell right for that question. So he said, "I

could use some grub and a chance to clean up."

Polk's fingers played around over the rifle, and his eyes didn't lose none of their unfriendliness.

I reckon I can oblige with them last two requests," he said grudgingly. "But a job—you'll have to talk to Reber, the foreman. Or the old man."

"The old man?" Charley asked hopefully.

"Hank Harrison. He owns the Half-moon."

Puzzled, Charley followed the cook into the kitchen. He washed up and ate. All the time, Polk watched him like he was afraid Charley would steal the cookstove.

"How long has Mr. Harrison owned this ranch?" Charley asked casually.

"Four years," Polk answered shortly.

Charley decided this wasn't the time for further questions. Finished eating, he set to work to remove the accumulations of his long journey. Glancing through the window after he'd shaved and cleaned up, he saw the girl's horse tied to a hitch-rail near the house.

He wondered how she fitted into the picture here. He wondered a lot of things as he stood there with the low sun on his brown face.

Three men came riding around the horse barn, sixguns swinging against their hips. One man took the horses into the barn, and the other two came rolling toward the bunkhouse. Their cold, narrowed eyes on Charley gave him goose pimples.

Polk shuffled out of the kitchen, wiping his red hands on his white apron.

"Herm," he said to the middle-aged, grim-faced gent who walked in the lead, "meet Charley Case. Looking for a job, he says. Charley, Herm Reber, our foreman."

THE MAN behind him stepped up, scowling. Tall, thin, dark as a gypsy, he let his right hand hang close to his gun like that was a lifelong habit.

"Otto Nash," the cook said.

Charley said hello to Otto. He didn't like the set-up, but there wasn't nothing he could do but pretend he was overjoyed to be in such unfriendly company.

"You'll have to talk to the old man about a job," Reber said. "You'll likely find him in—"

"He ain't home yet from—" Polk let it go at that.

"Where you from, Charley?" Reber asked.

"North of Denver," Charley answered truthfully.

The third man came stamping up from the barn. A youngish hardcase, with ragged yellow hair and pale-blue eyes that looked like a cross between a cake of ice and a slab of steel.

Reber introduced him as Leo Cord. Leo eyed Charley with distrust. And it was then that Charley had a hunch these men were afraid of him, that if he made a wrong move, they'd likely shoot first and ask questions later.

Darkness had fallen when Reber came into the bunkhouse and said, "The old man will see you now, Charley."

Charley followed Reber across the hard-packed earth toward the house. They had to duck under clothes line wires strung between iron-pipe posts. Charley remembered those posts well—his Uncle Jeb had made him dig the holes for them on a blistering day in August, while his Cousin Lark had stood in the shade, grinning. Charley ground his teeth.

They went through a side door into the room used as an office. Hank Harrison sat slumped behind a desk, a white-headed, silky-faced old man, with sunken and faded eyes. Reber made the introductions and then departed.

Harrison fixed his eyes on Charley's face. They were expressionless, yet Charley had a feeling that the oldster was afraid, too.

"Charley Case, huh?" Harrison said. "Ain't often anybody ever drifts into this valley. How'd you happen to?"

Charley shrugged. "By accident. Followed that creek down out of the mountains and—"

The old man suddenly choked and

wheezed. He took a white pill from a small bottle on his desk and swallowed it.

The girl came into the room. Her eyes were wide with worry—and were blue, like Charley had known they would be. She wore a riding skirt and a white blouse open at her tanned throat. She had a soft round chin and red lips and white, even teeth.

"Are you all right, Grandpa?" she asked, the light doing things to her golden hair. Then she saw Charley, and her eyes fixed on him like he had two heads or something.

The old man said in a tired voice, "I'm all right, Ella. This is Charley Case from up around Denver."

"Oh," she said.

She forced herself to smile, then hurried out of the room.

"A good girl, Ella," the old man said, his voice losing its harshness for the moment. "Looks after me like I was a sick baby. As for that job, Charley, we'll give you a try."

The old man closed his eyes, and Charley knew the interview was over, and he left.

He'd just ducked under the clothes line when the girl called softly, "I want to talk to you, please."

She came out of the deep shadows of the house, her face and the white blouse pale blurs in the starlight.

"What are you doing here in Half-moon Valley, Charley Case?" she asked, her voice as tight as a drum.

"Going to work for your granddad," he answered. "What did you think?"

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know anything for sure, except that my grandfather is a very sick man. It's his heart, and any sudden shock—" She put a hand on his arm. "Please tell me the truth," she whispered tensely. "You are here just to work, aren't you?"

WELL, he couldn't tell her about his Uncle Jeb. Not yet, anyway. So there was nothing to do but lie to her.

"That's right, miss. Now, will you tell me what everybody's afraid of?"

"Afraid? No one's afraid."

She turned and ran away from him.

For a minute, he stood leaning against a clothes line post, trying to figure things out. Then he remembered the roll of bills in his pocket. Six hundred dollars was too much money to run any chances with. So just because he had a hunch it was the smart thing to do, he hid the roll of bills in the hollow pipe crossarm of the clothes line post.

Then, he got to dreaming about Ella Harrison—how she'd looked in a bathing suit, how her hair had seemed to be alive in the lamplight, and how her blue eyes had been filled with fear and worry. He thought how nice it would be to keep a girl like Ella from worrying and being afraid. He thought of a lot of things, not once realizing how accident had brought them together.

In the bunkhouse, he found Polk, the cook, and Reber, the foreman, sitting at a table, drinking coffee. Leo Cord was snoring on a bunk. Otto Nash wasn't in sight.

Polk filled a thick cup and shoved it toward Charley.

"What'd the old man say?" Reber asked.

"Said you'd try me out," Charley told him, and almost choked on the coffee that was strong enough to stand up and fight. Reber nodded toward an empty bunk. "Yours," he grunted.

Charley began to feel drowsy, and crawled into the bunk. The next thing he knew, young Leo Cord was shaking him awake.

"You're to work with me today," Leo said.

Charley sat up. He felt woozy, and the inside of his mouth tasted like a scorched rubber boot. He remembered the coffee and suddenly realized he'd been doped.

Leo went on into the kitchen. Charley hastily examined his belongings. He could tell somebody had gone through his gear, his pockets, everything. And the six hundred dollars—he suddenly remembered then he'd stuck the money into the cross-

arm of the clothes line post. Relieved about the money, but baffled about everything else, he struggled into his clothes and stumbled weakly and uncertainly into the kitchen.

Polk set food before him and Leo, and they ate in silence. Polk didn't have anything to say, either.

Charley followed Leo out to the horse barn, and they saddled and rode toward the east gap of Half-moon Valley. Leo carried a Winchester in the saddle-boot, had a six strapped to his lean waist. Coming out of a dry wash, they met Otto Nash who looked tired and sleepy-eyed, and was armed with a rifle and a six-gun.

Leo grinned crookedly and asked, "Have a rough night, Otto?"

Nash spat and said, "Hell, no," and rode on.

"A great feller to play around at night," Leo said.

Charley didn't say anything, but he had an idea that Otto hadn't been doing much playing around.

Their destination proved to be a high ridge that overlooked the east entrance to the valley. Fourteen miles beyond the gap lay the trail-end town of Bentville.

A partly-constructed fence topped the ridge. Why anyone would want a fence up here, Charley couldn't understand, but he didn't ask questions. The tools were piled against an outcropping of red rocks, but Leo Cord wasn't in any hurry to get busy.

"Charley," he said, "kind of keep an eye on that trail."

Charley knew then that the fence building was nothing more than an excuse for keeping a man or two up here to watch this main entrance into the valley. Likely, if he had entered the valley from this end, he wouldn't have got as far as the ranch house. Which merely proved that fate had had a hand in getting him to the Half-moon all in one piece, but he didn't look at it this way. He figured he'd ridden in from the mountains because he hadn't wanted folks in Bentville to know he was back.

THEY fooled around all day, not building much fence. Come sundown, they rode back to the ranch. At supper, Herm Reber was missing, and Charley wondered if the grim-faced foreman was keeping an eye on the Bentville trail.

After supper, Charley wandered out into the darkness. He heard the opening and closing of a door, then saw the girl head across the hard-packed yard. Whistling cheerfully, he strolled toward her.

She faced about. "Who is it?" she asked tensely. He said, "Me, Charley Case."

"Oh, hello, Charley." She sounded like she might be glad it was him and not somebody else.

They walked to the hitch-rail and stood leaning against it. He could see the breeze tumbling her hair and suddenly wanted to touch it. He didn't. Just to start the ball rolling, he said something about the winter he'd worked in Denver.

"I've never been to Denver," she said. "Or any place, much. I've always lived in lonely places—like this."

Charley rolled a smoke. "It's not so bad here."

"Better than the last two ranches we had," she said. "Better than the trading post Grandfather ran for a time."

"You must've moved around a lot," he murmured.

Maybe she thought it was none of his business. Anyway, she changed the subject. "What about you, Charley?"

He couldn't tell her this had been his home from the time he was six until he'd run away at sixteen. So he made up a few things about himself and what he'd done.

"Now it's your turn," he said.

"My mother and father are dead," she said. "I've always lived with my grandfather. There's not much to tell."

"Who owned this ranch before your granddad bought it?"

"A man by the name of Singer. He and his son wanted to take over a feed store in Bentville and were glad to find a buyer for the ranch."

So that explained that. Lark had been

restless in this lonely place even before Charley had run away.

"Want to tell me what everyone here is afraid of?" Charley asked presently.

Ella laughed a little, unfunny laugh. "No one's afraid, that I know of," she said, and almost ran to the house.

"Me and my big mouth!" Charley thought disgustedly.

It wasn't until three days later that he stumbled onto a way to get next to Leo Cord. They were sitting on the ridge, staring down at the gap where Bent Creek wormed its way out of the valley. They were supposed to be building fence, but they weren't.

"This valley's about as good a hideout as I ever saw," Charley said. "It suits me fine."

Leo looked at Charley with narrowed eyes. "Just what are you talking about?" he asked in a tight voice.

"Ever hear of Jeb Singer and his son, Lark?"

Leo shook his head.

"Well, you seem like a square-shooter to me, Leo, so I'll tell you something," Charley said. "My name's Charley Singer, not Case, and Jeb's my uncle. When I was a kid, I lived with him here on the Half-moon. He treated me like dirt. And he let his kid, Lark, knock me around whenever he felt like it. Which was pretty often. Lark is three years older than me.

"One day Jeb sent me to the bank in Bentville with three hundred dollars. It was too hot a day for him or Lark to go. So I had to. Know what I did?"

Leo laughed. "You kept the money and ran."

"Good guess," Charley said. "I took a horse, too."

"Yeah," Leo said, "but why did you come back?"

"Five years make a lot of difference in a kid," Charley said, flexing his muscles. "He grows up. Learns how to use his fists. And a gun. I figured it was worth the risk just to come back and beat the hell out of Lark. And give the old man a dose of his own medicine. Like digging post holes on a hot day, while I stood in the shade and laughed at him."

"You're crazy," Leo said.

HE SHOVED to his feet, picked up a spade and went over to the fence.

"Take it easy," Charley said, laughing. "I know why we're here. Not to build a fence, but to watch the trail. Also, I know I was doped the first night I was here, because somebody wanted to look through my gear and try to find out if I was a lawman instead of a cowboy out of a job. Like I said, this place is a good hideout."

Leo sat down again and rolled another smoke.

"I guess you might as well know," he said.

"It's about time I knew something," Charley said.

Leo held a match to his quirly. "Everybody on the Half-moon has got something to be afraid of. Even Ella—only she's afraid because the rest of us are. Reber, he's been with the old man the longest. Polk's next. They came here with the old man four years ago. Otto drifted in soon after Harrison took over this ranch. I've been here about eight months. But a man's bound to pick up something in eight months, even from men who don't talk much about themselves. But now and then they do get to talking, just like you and me are now, Charley."

"Yeah," Charley said. "I know how it is."

"I got in a fight and killed a man," Leo said. "I was on the run, and this valley looked good to me. Polk stuck a knife into somebody's back when he was cooking for a mining outfit in Colorado. Herm Reber had money trouble. With Otto, it was woman trouble that ended in a killing. I figure, the old man, he's been on the run for years. Right now, some of us have got a feeling it's about time to run again."

Charley's eyes strayed to the trail. "Something's happened in Bentville that's scared you," he guessed.

Leo nodded. "Three strangers drifted into town a couple days before you

showed up, Charley. Otto knows a gambler in town who keeps us posted. These men are looking for somebody. They've done some talking with the sheriff, so they've got the law on their side. We don't know who they're after, but when you're on the run, strangers like that make you nervous."

"You telling me?" Charley said, scowling darkly for Leo's benefit.

"We're pretty spooky. Maybe Otto and me'll clear out any time now. We don't owe the old man anything—we've earned our keep here." Leo ground out his cigarette and stared bleakly at the east gap. "I don't aim to get hung, Charley. No more than you aim to go to jail for stealing from your uncle. Maybe you'd like to clear out with me and Otto?"

"No," Charley said. "Not before I see Uncle Jeb."

"He must've treated you kind of rough to make you want to take a chance like this."

"I hate his guts!" Charley said. "And Lark's, too!"

They were eating their lunch and drinking cold coffee when Otto Nash came riding up briskly from the direction of the ranch.

"Reber sent me to tell you to come to the house, Charley," Otto said. "I'm to stay and help Leo build fence."

Charley didn't say anything about the fence building being a blind. He caught his mount, saddled, and rode across the rolling grassland.

Maybe, he thought, it would be smart to ride to the timber along Bent Creek and follow the creek upstream and get out of here while the getting was good. He didn't owe old man Harrison a thing, either. But there was Ella—and Charley knew he'd stick around. If he came out on top, he'd still have plenty of time to visit his uncle. If he didn't come out on top—he shrugged and kicked his horse into a lope.

Reber wasn't at the ranch.

"He's been gone all day," Polk said, wiping his hands on his apron. "Maybe it's the old man who wants to see you."

CHARLEY went to the house. Ella let him in. Her face was drawn and pale.

"Charley, is something wrong?" she asked fearfully.

He gave her a reassuring grin and shook his head. "Does your granddad want to see me about something?"

The old man staggered into the room. He looked sick. He had the bottle of white pills in his hand.

"What makes you think I want to see you?" he asked crossly.

"Polk thought—"

"Polk's crazy!" the old man yelled. "And I'm busy. You get back to work, Charley!"

He stumbled out of the room and pulled the door shut after him.

Charley glanced at Ella, but she seemed to have forgotten him. He turned and walked outside.

He rode back to the ridge, but no one was there. He trailed Leo and Otto as far as Bent Creek and saw where they'd ridden into the shallow water. Whether they had headed toward Bentville, or had ridden upstream toward the snow-capped mountains, he couldn't tell. But he had a hunch they had left Half-moon Valley for good.

Charley followed the creek upstream, mainly because that was in the general direction of the ranch. He kept looking for a place where the two men might have ridden out of the stream, but found nothing. He rode as far as the swimming hole and reined in beside the deep, blue water, where he'd first seen Ella here.

Perhaps if he would have stopped to think about it, he might have realized that this whole business was just a series of accidents, or the working of fate. But Charley was worried, and it was close to sundown. So he swung away from the creek and rode at a fast clip toward the Half-moon ranch house.

There was a light in the house, but the bunkhouse was dark. He unsaddled and turned his mount into the barn, and then walked to the bunkhouse. Polk wasn't in the kitchen getting supper. Nobody was

there. And the cook's spare duds were gone, too.

Worried now, Charley hurried around to the front door of the house. That was when he saw the shadowy outlines of three saddle horses.

Otto and Leo might have came back, after all. The third horse, could be Reber's. But he had to be sure, so he circled through the dusk to get a good look at the horses. They were not Half-moon animals. And he knew then that the three strangers had moved in on the old man and Ella!

He tried to look through a window, but the shade was drawn. He eased up to the door and put an ear against it. He heard the rumble of men's voices. Then he heard Ella sobbing.

There seemed but one thing to do, if Ella was in trouble. He pulled his gun, kicked the door wide and stepped in.

The girl was sitting in old Hank Harrison's easy chair. She looked frightened and bewildered. Tears glistened on her cheeks.

Three men stood around her—an old man with white hair, and two big, broad men a dozen years older than Charley. They froze at the sight of the gun in Charley's hand.

"Take it easy!" Charley gritted.

For a moment, no one made a sound. Then Ella got to her feet and smiled.

"Thanks, Charley," she said. "But it's all right."

He didn't quite believe her. "Nobody's going to push you around if I can help it," he said.

He kept the man covered until she stepped over to him, took the gun from his hand and stuck it back into the holster. Then she turned away abruptly and ran into another room.

"Somebody had better start talking pronto!" Charley said.

"Ella's had a shock," the white-haired man said. "You tell him, Harry."

HARRY turned out to be Harry Turver, Ella's cousin. Harry said that twenty years ago, an uncle of his had married Hank Harrison's daughter against the old man's wish. There had been bad blood between the Harrisons and the Turvers for a long time. But the elopement brought matters to a head. Ella's mother died shortly after Ella was born, making old Hank more bitter than he'd been before. When Ella's father had come to claim his baby, old Hank kidnaped Ella and ran away with her.

All through the years, he had kept the girl from her family. He'd told her that he was her only living relative. Her father, constantly trying to find her, at last had heard of this old man and a girl living in the lonely Half-moon Valley. But before he could come here to make sure she was his daughter, fate had stepped in, and Ella's father had been killed by a half-wild bronc.

Now Ella's other grandfather and these two cousins, Harry and George Turver, had come to Bentville, hoping to learn more about the old man and the girl. But no one knew much about the people at the old Half-moon. Not even Jeb Singer, who had sold the ranch to the old man.

The Turvers had ridden to the ranch now, wanting to get this thing settled. If Ella was their girl, they wanted to take her back home with them. Distrusting and hating old Hank, they couldn't believe that she could be happy and well-cared-for.

"But from what she tells us," Harry finished, "I guess we were wrong. The old man was good to her, and she loved him."

"Was?" Charley said.

"He came out to meet us with a gun in his hand," Harry said. "Said he was too old and sick to run from the Turvers any longer, that it was our turn to run. Then just as he lifted the gun, he kind of folded up like an empty sack. A bad heart, Ella told us."

Charley stumbled out toward the dark and empty bunkhouse, thinking of old man Harrison running all these years because he'd lived with a great hate in his heart. And dying with that hate.

He thought of Otto Nash and Leo Cord,

running because they were afraid. He remembered how he'd run away from his Uncle Jeb and his Cousin Lark not so long ago.

Maybe Charley would have thought things through right then—how accidents shape a man's course—but at that moment Herm Reber called to him out of the darkness.

"Charley," he asked hoarsely, "is the old man dead?"

"Yeah," Charley answered.

"I was pretty sure," Reber said wearily. "And Otto's gone. Leo's gone. So has Polk. Now I'm going, too, before I get myself trapped here. How about you, Charley?"

"I'll stay," Charley said. And he knew why he would.

He stood there in the darkness, listening until he could no longer hear the hoofbeats of Reber's horse. Then he wandered to the clothes line post and fished the roll of bills from the crossarm. Quietly he saddled his horse and headed for Bentville. He knew exactly what he was going to do.

Charley Singer didn't wave the money under his Uncle Jeb's thin nose. He didn't lick the daylights out of Lark. Charley had learned some things, thanks to what he'd seen and heard in the past few days. He'd learned what it is like to want a girl like Ella. He'd learned what hate and fear do to men. And knowing how close he'd come to making the kind of a mistake that would have kept him away from Ella forever—

WELL, looking at old Jeb, he felt humble and ashamed. Sure the old man had made him work hard. But he'd given Charley a home. And Lark—well, maybe Lark couldn't be blamed for picking on this orphan cousin with whom he'd had to share his room and bed and everything else a kid gets to value as his very own.

Charley sat down beside the old man in the shade of the feed store, not hating him at all any more.

"I came back to return your money, Uncle Jeb," he said. "Interest, too, if you want it. And to pay for the horse and saddle."

Funny, but the old man wasn't sore or anything.

He blew his thin nose loudly and patted Charley's shoulder.

"You're a good boy, Charley," he said. "Welcome home."

And Lark got to his feet and held out his hand. Charley shook it warmly. Then he and Lark stood grinning at each other, and Lark said, "We could use another man here in the store, Charley." He sounded as if he meant it.

But Charley didn't stay. And the next day when he rode up to the Half-moon ranch house, Ella came running out to meet him, her hair like a blaze of sunshine.

"Charley!" she cried. "I was afraid you were like Herm and the others, that I'd never see you again!"

CHARLEY felt his heart begin to pound in a rib-busting manner. He didn't dare trust his voice.

"Will you stay here and look after things?" she asked, her eyes searching his. "While I go to visit my family? I'll come back soon, Charley, for this is my home. And when I come back—I mean, a girl likes to know she has someone around who'd fight for her if—" Suddenly her cheeks were flaming, and she wasn't meeting his gaze.

Charley took her in his arms and kissed her. Because he wanted to — so he thought.

But if he'd stopped to think, he would have known he kissed her because this was just another link in the chain of fateful accidents in his life. Like being entrusted with three hundred dollars he could steal. Like having to come back to show his Uncle Jeb a thing or two and finding a beautiful girl in a white bathing suit swimming in a creek.

However, this was no time to think. This was a time for action. So Charley kissed her again, never dreaming that Fate was watching and chuckling, likely making plans for the little Charleys and Ellas sure to come along. ● ● ●

He drank alone, did his killing alone, and died the same way

The Incredible Tom Horn

a true story by PAUL L. PEIL

AT THIRTEEN, Tom Horn decided he was a man. So he proceeded to give his old man a dose of his own tug strap medicine and ran away from his home in Missouri. Trudging to Independence he signed on as night-hawk with a freight caravan that was Santa Fé bound. In much the same manner, another fellow Missourian—Kit Carson—had started his trail to glory years before.

Tom was big for his age, rawboned as a mule, and on that frontier boyhood was of short duration. For the next thirty years Horn's adventures were man-sized.

Even that young he had the dominant personality that was to attract friends and

staunch defenders to the very last. He was what the Mexican people call *simpático.*

For a year he existed in the adobe capital, catch-as-catch-can, absorbing and adapting. He cussed with bearded Americano traders, took in *bailes paisanos,* and on occasion, in awe, attended mystic Mass at San Miguel with some *gente rica.* He had a way, this strapping cat-hipped, black-eyed youngster.

Before he was fifteen he rolled a stage over the dangerous renegade-infested passes. Between runs he often visited the Navajos in their nomadic camps.

Graduating into freighting, he six-strung a wagon and trailer, hauling mine machinery and army supplies, into Arizona. Here was a new southwestern vista, unlike the New Mexican scene. It was harsh, forbidding country where only the hardiest forms of life survived. And it was the habitat of the Apache.

Apache! The watchword of terror, it stood for treachery, murder, rapine. Tom frequently observed the fiendish handiwork of the red devils, and yet he was either dispassionate, or could dissemble well, for he seldom made the reservation posts without circulating amongst the villages. Wizened old braves, wily young bucks, the half-naked women, they all came to know him.

Tom Horn was *simpático. . . .*

It was a single wagon consignment for Fort Grant, and Tom had a lone helper. They were within fifty miles of their destination when Apaches jumped them from the sparse bear-grass and parched rocks. Without an arrow or a shot exchanged, Tom and the man found themselves lashed to spokes of the huge wagon wheels.

Tom was stoic, but his companion cracked, which was the unpardonable sin to the copper-colored savages. They cavorted around him, piercing his body with needle-sharp pine splinters. During the affair, one Indian stood on the sidelines, arms folded on chest, alternately watching the torture and Tom's superb control. Despite frowzy hair and paint-smeared features, there was something familiar about him to Tom. Presently the tortured man lapsed into unconsciousness and the gyrating horde shifted attention to Tom.

Not a muscle twitched in his blanched face as they tormented him, snagging his clothes with the poniards. They were renting his flesh when the non-participant Apache stepped in, gutturally halting them. A grin splitting his hideous visage, he jabbed Tom's torso with a stiff index finger.

"You much brave," he said, and when the Missouri youth showed no recognition, he thumped his own chest. "You know; me Huachuca!"

Tom answered in the Apache tongue, "Huachuca? Yes! Tell me, have the San Carlos gone off the reserve?"

Huachuca screwed up his face. "San Carlos are squaws. Me Chiricahua now!" He fixed Tom with an intent, lizard-like scrutiny. "You make good Apache. Come with me!"

Tom didn't demur. This bloodthirsty, tizwin-soused marauder wasn't the peaceful agency buck he'd known. So, on an Indian pony, he rode away with him, knee to knee. He glanced back once. The warriors were looting the wagon. The man crucified to the wheel was a flaming pincushion; they had lighted the pine slivers. . . .

A HUNDRED miles deep in old Mexico, Tom Horn stood in the midst of the most infamous rancheria in Western Americana: Geronimo's rendezvous. Not yet sixteen, Tom was the match of any redskin. Ahead of him was a full year here, in which he would receive a well-rounded education in Apache ways.

The time was the late seventies. The Apache situation in Arizona was a powder keg. They held the territory in a virtual state of siege. First there had been Mangus Colorado, then Cochise, now Geronimo, the most crafty. Dotting Arizona's expanse was a string of so-called forts, inadequately manned by troopers green in Indian fighting. With typical Washington finesse, every few months brought a transfer of personnel or change of campaign conduct. Small wonder it took twenty

years to settle the southern border Indian problem.

The Apaches consisted of six tribal divisions: the seldom belligerent White Mountain and San Carlos groups, and the always warlike Tonto, Agua Caliente, Chiricahua and Cibicu branches. There was a gimhua could, by simply changing his hair style, become a peaceful San Carlos, and vice versa. Many a brave sated his lust on the war trail, then returned as a blanket pacifist to gain his second wind on government dole.

Although nominal leader of the Apaches, Geronimo was not a warrior. He was politician, orator, tactician for the cutthroat legions. Nana and Loco, eighty years young and still going strong, were the chiefs. From constantly shifting bases below the border, they shelled Arizona with steady, systematic forays.

Tom spent a year in this nerve center of savagery. He witnessed all its phases. The raiding parties; the frenzied dancing; the tizwin brewed in batches; the roaring sessions of Geronimo. It was to serve him well in the near future. Yet perhaps in the long run, it was this which warped his character and carried him the thirteen steps up to a hanging gallows.

TOM HORN was seventeen and six feet of arrow-straight brawn, with a dark, impervious face, when he crossed the baked parade of Fort Bowie and met the sandy-hued Chief of Scouts, Al Sieber.

"Hello, Horn. When I heard you'd escaped from Geronimo's camp, I sent for you *inmediatamente.*"

"Didn't escape," Tom said. "Had free passage."

Sieber cocked eyebrows. "How?"

"They held a Sun Dance. Old Gee himself came and asked me if I had decided to become a warrior, a full-fledged 'Pache. I considered, told him no. He seemed disappointed but said I was free to leave, and free to return whenever I wish, as we would be chickasaws—brothers—forever."

Tom hired out as civilian scout and interpreter for the Army in blue which launched the aging, bleach-eyed Sieber and the young, inky-eyed Missourian as a team. For seven years, off and on, they provided a backbone for operations. Tom proved an apt pupil, though as volatile as any Apache. He was unpredictable rather than impulsive and in the opinion of Sieber, the veteran, he had an Indian mind.

They were in the saddle day and night tracking down unlawful traffic, ferreting out cactus whisky caches, rounding up or preventing reservation strays. Horn was suasive to a point, beyond which he was apt to shoot the resistant. Some of his measures were looked upon as massacres by unseasoned C.O.'s. He was too drastic, they said, and yet had to admit that in a surprisingly short time the reservations had become as quiet as tea parties.

Eventually Sieber's reorganized scouts and Indian police, with Tom in command, put the clamps so tight on tribal movements that Geronimo sent a request for a personal conference with the "Talking Boy," as he called Tom. Horn was living with Chief Pedro in the San Carlos village at the time and had to ride two days into Mexico to meet him.

Geronimo's ranks had now been reduced, his flow of blanket malcontents cut off. If he knew of Tom's hand in his predicament he concealed the fact. The two men, neither of whom knew the meaning of fear, greeted each other with ceremony. When he got around to it, Gee inquired the terms upon which his rancheria could be surrendered. Tom promised to negotiate. As he left, Tonto, a lesser lieutenant, joined him with twenty-odd bucks and asked for safe conduct back.

It created quite a stir at Whipple when Tom herded in these two dozen first-string raiders. However he was summoned before General Wilcox, another strange face who had assumed departmental command during his absence. Washington, it appeared, was displeased with reports of the treatment of Indians. Eastern newspapers had singled Horn out for unfavorable publicity. Washington's decision was to pursue a different policy—placation!—toward the desert devils.

Tom Horn resigned.

Al Sieber, who was a sick man, protested to no avail. Tom told him, "Old Gee has some bee buzzing in his war-bonnet. Watch him." He then went off to lusty Tombstone to enjoy a well-earned vacation. . . .

The wing of good grace was spread over Tonto and his rebels. A few other small bands trickled in. All brought personal plunder and found their deeds condoned. Heretofore Geronimo had used Mexico as a haven of refuge, striking only at Arizona. Now with evidence that the Army would accord his horde immunity, he hurled his remaining legions over northern Mexico.

Through Guaymas, Hermosillo, Chihuahua, could be heard the pound of Apache hoofs and the ululating war cry. Then they converged at the border. At Cananea they encountered a force of infantry, which they scattered like chaff. Driving stolen stock before them, loaded high with loot, they came to the line, a thousand strong. They demanded safe conduct—and they got it!

This became an international incident, with the Government footing the indemnity claims. It provided Arizonians with a standing joke on the Army for years. And it raised a cry for Tom Horn's return.

BACK ON THE payroll, replacing the crippled Sieber as Chief of Scouts, Tom again found himself fouled up by red tape and corrupt Bureau politics. But the Army, hip-shot from some hard campaigns, was more susceptible to his ideas this time—willing to back him up. If peace was to be made to stick, it had to be done now while the almost-whole Apache nation was in camp. It was now or never!

While the reservations seemed quiet, an old hand like Tom could feel the undercover unrest. He watched smoke talk in the platinum glare of day, signal fires wink in the turquoise night. As long as Geronimo, with a few brain-trusters, was perched on a crag down in Sonora, these people were subject to his every whim, beck or call. Someday these little blazes would spread into a very hot bonfire.

Despite a frustrated assassination attempt, Horn attached himself to Loco's faction, figuring Geronimo's deputy was in on whatever was brewing. This proved to be the case and when the storm broke one chilly dawn, Tom was in the middle of it. When he tumbled out of his blankets, the entire Chiricahua camp was folded and on the stampede to the south. Tom fought clear, crabbed into brush, where he observed the sheer pageantry. Squaws, children, at least four thousand head of mixed stock, the mounted braves. He covered the seven miles to the post on foot.

It had been organized well, the other tribes timed to similar breaks. Old Gee had recalled his legions.

The forts—Tonto, Bowie and Apache, Thomas, Yuma and Whipple—all spewed troops into the field. But the border stopped them like an invisible wall. Colonel Forsythe had decided to buck the tiger with Tom. He sent his command "off bounds," to smash Loco's clan to bits and to defy any Mexican cavalry which might try to arrest them for trespassing. This action, however, hastened an international agreement which permitted soldiers of either country to pursue marauders across the Line.

Meanwhile Arizona was being ravished. Not since Colorado and Cochise combined talents in the early sixties, had such hell been loosed. It lasted two years, washing out a number of generals until Crook and Miles came along. They were red fighters deluxe; both supported Horn, although Miles admitted to an active personal dislike for Tom.

Crook set the stage when he accompanied the tall Missourian into Geronimo's stronghold for a showdown conference. In this year—1886—Gee was still a defiant figure in breech-clout and pointed-toe teguas, but he could read the handwriting on the wall. It was Tom Horn who translated surrender terms between him and Miles.

The game was over. No longer pampered wards of the Government, the Apache war lords went to Florida as pris-

oners of war. Of all the names which contributed to the fame of the long campaign —Godwin, Tupper, Lawton, Forsythe, Gatewood—Tom Horn's should be high on the list. In a great part it was his strategy, his knowledge of Apache craftiness that brought success.

And when it was over, and he was being recommended for a Congressional Medal of Honor for valor, Tom was somewhere in mañana land, trailing the Apache Kid who'd shot his friend, Sieber. The Kid was a "dog soldier" who went mad, fanging his way into Mexico where he vanished into thin air. What befell him was never known, but Tom Horn seemed satisfied when he rode up across the border.

AT THIS stage of his career Tom Horn was a restless man. For thirteen years, half his life, he'd lived on excitement. It was in his system, like alcohol in a drunkard's, and now with the Army "gone barracks" after the Apache wars, he found himself a square peg in a round hole.

Times were changing. Inch by inch the old West, lusty and untamed, was being brought under the heel of law and order. Its days of self-sufficiency were passing. Either his nature was too complex or too simple, but it was difficult for Horn to grasp this coming change. In all probability it had been the same with Geronimo and his people.

For a year Horn worked some mining prospects. A handsome, hard-as-nails fellow, always wearing a red shirt, he was well known all over Arizona, yet when he drank it was usually alone. Not mean when drunk, and still capable of making strong friends, he had a sly, crafty quality that was being dredged to the surface. His Apache years had marked him.

When the Tonto Basin trouble broke, Horn became a deputy under three sheriffs at the same time: Bucky O'Neil, Commodore Owens and Glenn Reynolds, each a fighting man of the first water. It was an accolade well conferred, for Horn was right in his element. The affair was more vendetta—ambush and run—than outright range war, and Tom stalked Pleasant Valley like an Indian. As a peace-maker he struck telling blows that eventually closed out the bloodiest feud Arizona had ever known.

For a spell after that, he just loafed, gambling in Phoenix and winning a silver-mounted saddle in a steer roping contest. He followed through at Globe, again topping some of the best rope hands in that cow-country. Then back to work he went, as an operative for the famous Pinkertons.

He was paired off with Charlie Siringo, a noted stock detective. Although completely unlike each other, the two men became steadfast friends, Siringo in later years always ready to defend Tom's name.

As a range dick, however, Tom was too efficient. He was apt to be judge, jury, executioner. He was put on the carpet and warned to change his style. He couldn't do that, and so they parted company.

But Tom didn't care, for by the grapevine had come a call for men of his caliber. In Johnson County, Wyoming, the last vestige of frontier remained. Beef barons, who'd wrested their range at gun-point, were organizing against this new order of things. Like Tom, they were die-hards of a past school. Recruiting gun talent for them, Tom molded a Colt crew that was to see plenty of action in the Powder River invasion.

This event, in which the biggies tried to brand nesters and small ranchers as rustlers, back-fired. A troop of cavalry had to extricate them from the crossfire and take them into "protective custody." That, and the subsequent court wrangling which bankrupted the less affluent cow-kings, should have convinced them their cause was doomed. The open range was gone, and the lavish Cheyenne Club era with it. But like a snake with a broken back, they struck on, always getting more and more feeble.

Although Tom had played no part in the actual fiasco, by virtue of his background activities, he decided it wise to bow out for a time. He went to Mexico, some said, or to South America.

TOM HORN had a gift for always being near trouble. The Spanish-American War was the next highlight in his life. General Miles, of the Apache campaigns, who had always felt a reluctant admiration for the dark-natured Horn, made him chief pack-master for the expeditionary army. The conflict, which turned out to be a flash in the pan, lasted long enough for Tom to earn a citation for bravery from a scrappy little man named Teddy Roosevelt.

After that, Tom Horn returned to the States in ill health. Moody, hard-drinking, conscious maybe that his life's account was running on the debit side of the ledger, he couldn't adjust himself. Just turned forty, he should have been in his prime, but somewhere along those years, time had passed him by. He was soured on the world.

Back in Wyoming, others were still trying to stop the clock. Again he joined them, and the end was near. . . .

The man from Iron Mountain was avoided by his own kind, the gunmen who had been imported in droves by the Stock Association to stage its last stand. Wyoming groaned under their intimidation, night riding and arson. But these little people, as always, outnumbered the royalty, and sometimes drastic measures were necessary—such as bushwhack. Then it was that a .30-30 would *spang* from some wind-swept butte, or cutbank, or tree clump. The victim, when found, would have a round rock under his head. And the red-shirted man from Iron Mountain would have $600 to celebrate on.

The gunmen feared Tom Horn because of the gun he wore on his hip. The nester and small stockman feared the .30-30 in his saddle scabbard.

They put Tom's number in the pot. Their hate was a passive thing, and their patience equalled any Apache's. Sooner or later, he'd slip and they'd have the goods on him. Meanwhile they let the big shots ride to their downfall, their gun-dogs scattering.

And at long last Horn, the ambush ace, was arrested for the murder of a thirteen-year-old squatter kid, whose identity had been mistaken for his father. The evidence was strictly circumstantial, based on a purported confession that a deputy U. S. Marshal had obtained from Horn during a drunken interlude.

True or not, in Horn's case the scales were finally tipped for a long deferred justice.

Tom made the most of his trial, which was prolonged and sensational. Anonymous money was paid for his defense. Arrested in January, 1902, he was tried in October and convicted.

An appeal went to higher courts, and while he paced his cell, a morose and bewildered figure, various offers of commutation were made him if he would betray his confidences. Tom Horn had fallen from the top of manhood's ladder, but he hadn't fallen that far. He never implicated anyone.

With his sentence upheld, he made a desperate jail-break in August, 1903. For half an hour he held freedom in his shaky fingers before he was recaptured. Something happened to him after that. He threw off his dazed air, bucked up.

When they marched him up the thirteen steps to a hanging noose, on a raw November day, he was a brave, defiant figure. Standing on his perch, perhaps he remembered another who'd fought and lost: Geronimo.

It was a red letter day for the common people of Wyoming, and properly so. A new era was being ushered in, the old order perishing when Tom Horn died on the gallows. But, let it be remembered—he died game.

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The Gunman

By NORMAN B. STOUGH

A man handy with guns was either on the side of the law, or he wasn't. It was generally fatal, either way . . .

HE RODE into Stoneman Springs the day after I took over as marshal. I knew he was a gunman, just like one butcher or newspaperman can tell another. He was the kind of Colt-slinger they describe as shifty-eyed, nervous, and itchy-fingered. I couldn't see his eyes but I'd have bet they weren't shifty. I've known a lot of gunmen, and none of them were shifty-eyed or nervous. That

type didn't live long enough to get good.

This one looked good. Short and wiry, with long fingers and big thumbs. I watched him ride down Chisum Street and just by looking, I knew he was tough. He slouched over in the saddle, like a man will when he's tired. He didn't seem to be looking at anything along the street, but I knew he wasn't missing the slightest flicker of movement.

Those eyes were sizing up the town from a gunman's viewpoint. Not the dusty streets, unpainted sun-and-sand weathered false fronts along them—every west Texas town looks pretty much the same. A gunman looks for things like how many saloons there are in town and how many men look at him with thinned lips and narrowed eyes.

Where the "decent" element has control of a town, there are few of the first and more of the second. That kind of town is rough on gunmen. Stoneman Springs is. There are three churches and only two saloons. We have a dress shop, a drug store, and a grocery on Chisum Street. A real civilized town, except for the people. People never get civilized—only less savage.

I could almost feel the gunman thinking those thoughts as he looked at the town. When he came abreast of where I stood on the boardwalk, he looked at me for the instant it takes to size up a man. His eyes were calm but the coldest blue I'd ever seen; the kind that could bore holes through you. So could the Colt he had hung on his lower right-hand corner, but the holes it made would be the permanent kind. He was nearing forty, and you have to be good to get that old. I know.

I also knew he meant trouble. He wouldn't start it; they never do. The gentle townsfolk would, though. They wouldn't want a gunman in their town, killing little children in their beds, running amuck with a smoking sixgun in each hand, and kicking their dogs. That's why they paid me a hundred a month to act as their housekeeper. Townsfolk can't abide killing, unless they pay the killer. They'd want me to get rid of him, even if it meant killing him.

I knew how he'd feel when I told him. Before I settled down and pinned on the star, I'd been asked to move by maybe a hundred town marshals. Only once did I ever refuse when I knew I wasn't wanted. He was a swaggering kid who didn't ask, just told. I don't order easy, and he made the mistake of trying to back up his order with a sixgun. It would have worked if I'd been slower or he'd been faster.

Now the thief was riding his own horse, and I was the one who would have to see to it that the other man left town. This one looked like he wouldn't take any kindlier to orders than I do, so I decided that when the time came, I'd ask real polite like.

IF HE refused to go, and I couldn't make him, it would be my funeral, and that isn't meant figuratively. I'd figured it would take the decent people a couple of days to get up in the air over having a nasty old killer in town. I was wrong. The morning after he rode in, Al Wanderman came into the office pretty well steamed up. Al's the druggist and our mayor. He's paying my wages so when he speaks, I listen. And he spoke. Al was never one to mince words. He threw a gravelly "good morning" my way, then settled down to business.

"Tony, what the hell's going on? We're paying you to keep this town decent and we want it done right. Now either get that gunny out of town or give him your badge and get out yourself!" He punctuated by banging a fist on my desk and put the final period on with the slam of my office door.

By the time he'd reached his drug store two doors down, I'd mumbled, "Yes sir," and started looking to my gun. I groaned at the thought of having to use it. For one thing, the noise hurts my ears and for another, it was too early in the day for a gunfight. Besides, the guy I'd be using it on wouldn't take kindly to being shot and would put up six good ar-

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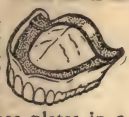

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guments against such a happening. I didn't feel good.

An hour went by before I got around to going across the street to the Bull's Horn. The Bull's Horn is our respectable saloon, and I knew I'd find the gunny there having a cold beer. It was hot crossing the street and my boots made puffs of dust when I put them down. I remember thinking I'd have to polish them before I went to bed. I'd been meaning to for a couple of days.

After the sun outside, it was cool and dim in the Bull's Horn. I stood just inside the door until I could see. He was standing at the bar with a glass of beer in front of him. He didn't look my way but he knew I was there and why. He was a nice looking fellow, around my age and seemed mild enough, except for those eyes. I felt like a heel, but a hundred a month is better than cowpoke's wages of thirty.

I walked over to the bar on his left, so that when he turned to face me, his gun hand would be against the bar. He looked up at me then. I didn't say anything, just looked at his eyes, cold and blue as a mountain spring. We stared at each other for what seemed an hour. Then he turned back to his beer.

"I'm tired of running, Marshal. I've run every time till now, but this time I'm tired."

His voice was calm and low. I couldn't help liking him, but a job's a job, and Al Wanderman could be mighty mean.

"I know, fellow, but I've got my orders to run you out or give you the badge. I need the money."

He pushed back from the bar, twisting to face me and reaching for his short-barreled Colts. He was fast. I didn't pull iron; I'd never have beaten him. Bending at the knees, I fired both guns through the bottoms of the holsters. I killed him before he could squeeze off a shot, both my bullets hitting within the space of an inch, a little above and to the left of his belt buckle. I still didn't feel good, and my ears hurt.

You can't kill a man and just forget it.

I kept hearing that low, calm voice saying, "I'm tired." Others in the saloon had heard it, too. A man said, "Well, no matter how tired he was, he's in for a good long rest."

I felt like kicking that skunk's teeth down his filthy throat. I had to go through the gunman's pockets of course. There were a few papers and a letter with the name Clifford Ross on them. It suddenly struck me that I'd killed a man without even knowing his name, where he was from, whether he was married or not. In fact, I knew nothing about him, except that the people of this town didn't want him in it. Because of that, and a hundred a month, I'd killed him. I didn't even like me, right then.

He was buried in Boot Hill, as befitted one of his calling, and the whole thing was more or less forgotten. By everybody but me.

NEARLY six weeks later I got the news I'd been expecting. Ross had two brothers who were determined to send me along to keep him company. I got the news from a drifter I had as a guest in the jug one night. He assured me I had nothing to worry about from them.

"Neither one of them can hardly get out of their own way, Marshal. You could spot 'em first, grab, and still get 'em both." I thanked him for the information and ran him out of town next morning.

News like that gets around mighty fast, though. I was expecting a visit from Druggist-Mayor Wanderman, but I wasn't prepared for the speech he delivered.

"Tony, you've heard that that gunny had a couple of brothers who've sworn to get you?"

It wasn't a question, but he wanted an answer.

"Sure, Mr. Wanderman, but they aren't gunmen. If they want to commit suicide, I'll oblige."

"That killing was the first we've had in Stoneman Springs for three years, Tony. We don't want any more."

[*Turn page*]

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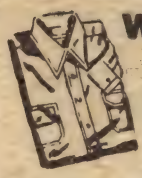

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He had me confused then, and I could tell that was what he wanted. I just said, "Why?" and tried to figure it.

His voice was hard when he answered me. "This town isn't one of the wild cow-towns you're used to living in, Tony. We're respectable people and we don't want a lot of gunfights in our town. We don't want our kids growing up remembering the town as a bloody battlefield or, worse, looking up to you as a hero because you're half a second faster with a gun than the next man. We want you to leave town before the Ross brothers get here. We don't want any more killing here, you understand?"

I said, "Look, Mr. Wanderman, you people hired me to keep the unwanted element out and gave me no choice but to kill if they wouldn't go. Now, you're telling me to get out because I followed your orders. I won't do it, and don't make the mistake of trying to force me!" I was mad now, and when he started to open his mouth, I cocked a fist and pointed at the door. "Get the hell out of here and stay out. I'll leave town when I get damned good and ready and I'm not arguing. Nor do I want any arguments from you. Now, get out!"

He was still opening and shutting his mouth when he left, but no sound was coming out. I knew half the town was listening, but I didn't give a damn if the whole state of Texas heard me. I get that way when I'm mad.

I went across the street to the Bull's Horn for a beer to cool me off. I was pretty steamed up over the way I was being used, then backed out from under when the going got rough. My weak faith in humanity was just about to fail completely, and I hated the idea. It was about all that had kept me from the owl-hoot trail down the years, a feeling that maybe people weren't as bad as I thought. I was mentally kicking myself for a damned fool for that faith when I walked into the Bull's Horn.

"Beer, Chuck," I growled at the glass swabber.

He took his time getting the brew.

When he finally set it down in front of me, it was mostly foam, and warm. I laid a nickel on the bar and took a sip of the stuff.

"The price of beer is a quarter," Chuck said in his surliest voice, and I caught on. I was about to get the nasty treatment.

I grinned at myself in the mirror and thought, "Okay, boys, you'll see how a man acts while you're being children." But I didn't act the man. Not when my steak came up raw with burned potatoes, nor when I was nicked seven times by the barber who had shaved me twice a week for six months without a cut, nor after I had said "Good morning" a hundred times without getting an answer. And every morning I found a note under my door warning me to leave or suffer the tortures of the damned.

Finally I blew up. I took the razor away from the barber and cut all the buttons off his shirt, threw a raw steak at the waitress, and poured a two-bit beer down Chuck's throat. Then I went to see Abe Curson, the only man in town I respected. Abe had been marshal before I took over but he had got a belly-full of it and retired to his two-acre "ranch" on the edge of town to make bridles for the cowpokes around the area. He was nearly seventy, but no man in town was sharper. I came straight to the point.

"Abe, what would you do in my place? You know the story. You know I'm not afraid of the Ross boys and you know how much I hate the guts of the people in this hole. But I can't take a hell of a lot more of the treatment I'm getting without slapping someone silly. What do you think I should do?"

OLD ABE was a quiet man, the sort who doesn't say much but knows what he means when he does speak. He knew now. "Tony, if I was you, I'd get out. I don't agree with the way Al Wanderman tried to get you to go but I do think you should leave. I kept the peace in this town for thirty years and still have

[*Turn page*]

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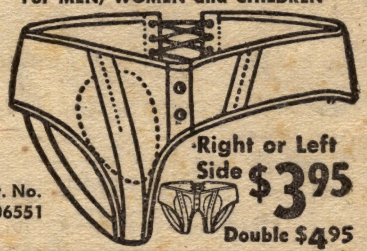

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my first man to kill. I never have held with killing nor with a man who killed. I don't want to see any more killing in the streets of Stoneman Springs. Too many people stand to get hurt. Get out, Tony." He got up and opened the door for me.

That sort of thing follows you. I've seen a hundred towns since then, and always there are whispers, stares, the feeling of disgust in the air. No one but fools call me a coward, but they have no respect for a man who runs away from trouble.

The towns are always the same. Everyone has the same weatherbeaten false fronts lining the same dusty streets, the same tight-lipped, narrow-eyed faces. There's always the same marshal on the sidewalk when you ride in, giving you the same calculating inspection. The words are always the same when they ask me to run.

Worst of all, there are always too few saloons and too many homes, stores, and churches. This saloon is the only one in this town, and they have four churches and a haberdashery. I just saw a pompous looking ass come out of the marshal's office across the street. He'll be over soon to tell me to run.

I keep remembering another gunny with cold blue eyes and a calm voice, saying, "Marshal, I'm tired of running." This badgeman had better be good, real good. I know how that other gunman felt—and this time I'm not running, either.

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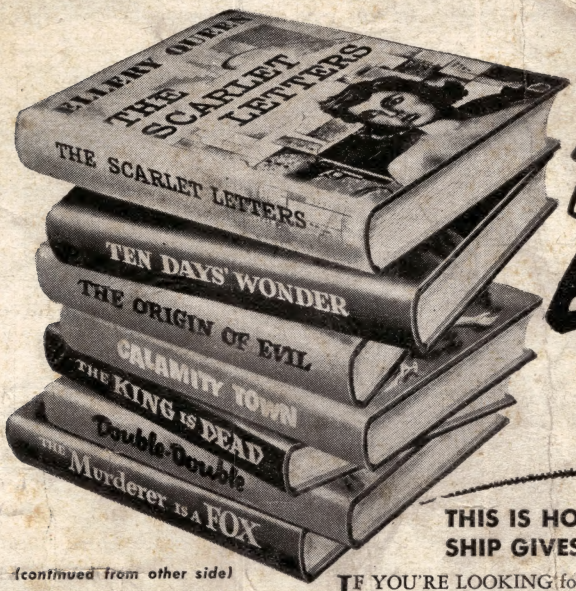

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(continued from other side)

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